

THE ARGOSY.

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THE MISTRESS OF BRAE FARM.

BY ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY.

CHAPTER VI.

A CONTENTED WOMAN.



S Lorraine and Colonel Trevor turned the corner by the farm buildings, they came upon Ellison standing by the horse block talking to a fair, sturdy-looking young man in a rough grey suit. She looked extremely surprised when she caught sight of the little cavalcade. Tedo called out to her at once, and to his evident reluctance, was delivered into his mother's tender arms.

"That must do for to-day, Sam," observed Ellison hastily; "we will discuss the matter more fully to-morrow. Well, Lorraine, what does this mean? You and Tedo seem good friends with my cousin."

"Colonel Trevor has been so kind to Tedo," replied Lorraine; "he saw that he was tired, and he brought him all the way from the lodge gates. I did not know who was speaking to me at first until he introduced himself—but he knew my name."

"I recognised you from your cousin's description," returned Colonel Trevor. "Ellison's portraits are always drawn correctly. She has a talent for seizing people's salient points; there is nothing ambiguous or indefinite in her descriptions—he who runs may read. Ah, what did I tell you, Mrs. Herbert," as Ellison, passing him with a quiet smile, began feeding Miss Alice with sugar from her apron pocket. Lorraine watched them with delight as the pretty creature received the dainty with her delicate lips, and then pressed her nose against Ellison's shoulder as though to coax her for more. "Miss Alice is

getting demoralised. I believe she would follow you like a dog, Ellison; try her when she has finished her sugar. Go towards the stable and call her."

"Very well," returned his cousin obediently; and she soon found Colonel Trevor was right. The mare followed her, drooping her graceful neck and whinnying softly, until they both disappeared from sight. Then Colonel Trevor went slowly after them, and Lorraine carried her boy into the house.

He found Ellison tying up the mare herself; then she gave her a feed of corn. Colonel Trevor watched her with amused eyes.

"What a useful woman you are," he said, as she rejoined him. "I believe you could saddle Miss Alice as well as feed her."

"To be sure," she returned composedly. "I have harnessed Mollie before now, when I wanted the phaeton in a hurry, and I could not find Joe Brand. I should hate to be helpless. Well, Gavin, what do you think of my cousin? I know you make up your mind at once about people, so I am not afraid to ask you."

"I have formed a good opinion of her already," was the reply. "She is natural and lady-like, and she is not ashamed to say what she thinks. In that one trait she resembles you, Ellison; but, if I do not mistake, in everything else she is your exact opposite."

"Now, Gavin, this is absurd. You have only been a quarter of an hour in Lorraine's company, it is perfectly impossible that you could correctly diagnose her character. Why should you say that she is my opposite."

"My dear Ellison, simply because it is the truth. In a quarter of an hour you may find out a good deal about a person. Besides, Mrs. Herbert is not difficult to read, there is nothing occult or mysterious about her. She is an amiable young woman, who has seen a great deal of the sad side of life, and she is far too sympathetic by nature ever to try and forget it. She lives in her affections, and it is her nature to be cheerful. She walks and talks like a gentlewoman, *voila tout*."

"Gavin, I often think you are a very clever man. If you had asked me my opinion about Lorraine, I should have taken a week to answer you. I never let myself be prepossessed by a pleasing exterior or manners. I must find out more about people before I can heartily say I like them. Lorraine interests me, and she seems nice; that is all I can say at present about her."

"That is because you are cautious by nature. I am cautious, too, but I can read quickly. Mrs. Herbert trusted me with her boy; when Miss Alice pranced her lips were white with fear, yet she would not hurt my feelings by saying that she was afraid; I could not help noticing that. In her case you would not have been nervous; when you trust a person your trust is so absolute that it excludes fear."

"Yes; but you forget. I know you, Gavin, and you are a stranger to Lorraine. My trust has grown imperceptibly for years."

She looked up in his face as she spoke, with the slow, sweet smile

that was habitual to her, and that was so pleasant to his eyes ; and he answered it by taking her hand and putting it gently on his arm.

It was almost a lover-like caress, but neither of them saw it in that light. To Ellison the idea had not yet dawned that her cousin might wish to marry her. She was so much his confidante that she knew how faithful he was to the memory of his wife, and though she had never seen Helen, she had heard so much about her from his lips that she always seemed to her like a long-lost friend of her own. In depressed moods Ellison was the only living being to whom Colonel Trevor could bring himself to speak of his wife. He liked her quiet sympathy, the absence of fuss and agitation. When he mentioned Helen to his mother she always cried, and called him her poor, dear Gavin, and pitied and fondled him till his nerves got the better of him, and he would tell himself angrily that he was a fool to speak of the past.

Marriage was not to Ellison, as it was to some women, the aim and object in life ; she gloried too much in her freedom to yield her liberty lightly. She had had her chances ; the mistress of Brae Farm was too well dowered not to possess marketable value in men's eyes ; besides which she was attractive, a fine woman, and a kind-hearted one too. Philip Earnshaw had been deeply smitten, and had left England with a sore heart because Ellison had refused him ; but though she had liked him best of all her suitors, her pity had been scant for him.

"Poor old Phil ! and you are not half sorry for him, you hard-hearted woman," Colonel Trevor had said to her one day rather bluntly, for the proverbial little bird had carried him the news ; but Ellison had coloured angrily and held her head high.

"You have no right to know about it, Gavin. Cousin Louise ought to have known better ; it is no one's business but Mr. Earnshaw's and mine."

"And mine. You forget that all that concerns you interests me deeply."

"No, Gavin," she returned in a softened tone, "I do not forgive but do you not see that it is kinder to Mr. Earnshaw that people should not know about it. He had no right to ask me ; it was a great mistake. I never gave him the slightest pretext for doing so ; but he chose to make himself and me exceedingly uncomfortable. Well, he is on his way to India now, so I must forgive him ; but please do not mention his name to me again," and as Ellison seemed really put out and very unlike her tranquil self, he dropped the subject.

It might be well for some women to marry, she sometimes said when friends spoke to her on the subject ; but as regards herself, a single life suited her best. She was not a submissive woman ; it would be difficult for her to yield to another person's judgment unless her own entirely agreed. She preferred solitude and freedom to daily friction and argument.

Ellison was perfectly in earnest when she said this ; but she had

never asked herself how much of her content depended on her close friendship with her cousin ; hitherto it had been warm enough and strong enough to satisfy her affectionate instincts. Gavin depended on her for sympathy, he trusted her and confided in her ; his daily visits, their long talks together were all important factors in her happiness, and as long as things remained on their present footing she was utterly and truly content.

The idea that Gavin might wish to marry again had not yet troubled her consciousness. If that day should ever come, and not she, but another woman should be his choice—how would it fare with Ellison then ?

Happily no such thought disturbed Ellison's serenity ; she had not yet noticed the first faint stirrings of long dormant feelings in Gavin ; and as little did she know that the thought had already occurred to him that perhaps some day he might ask her to be his wife. Some day ! There was no hurry for the present, things were better as they were ; he was not desirous of change, and was certainly in no mood to play the lover. "A man cannot marry twice," he had once said to his mother's dismay ; but latterly he had varied this formula to himself : "A man cannot love twice in the same way ;" and yet as he said it he knew there were many exceptions to this rule.

Gavin's mute caress had made Ellison very happy ; when his hand, so strong and sinewy, took hers and held it with brotherly freedom on his arm, she knew that he was moved to unusual tenderness, and she was right.

"What can a man want more when he is no longer young and the best of life is over for him," he was saying to himself. "Ever since I came back to England Ellison has been a comfort to me, my need of her increases. Brae Farm and Brae House are too far apart. I should like to have her always near me, to be able to talk to her whenever I am inclined. Shall I tell her so ? Will she be ready to listen to me ? I know well she has no drawing towards matrimony ; but 'she is a woman, and therefore to be won,' as Shakespeare says, and if any one man has a chance with Ellison it will be myself." And these thoughts made Colonel Trevor so quiet and abstracted during tea, that more than once Ellison's calm blue eyes rested on his face inquiringly.

Tedo was having his tea under Dorcas' care, so Lorraine was free to enjoy hers. She was tired with her long ramble and the day's pleasure, and was content to rest without talking.

"We are all very silent," observed Ellison at last. "Gavin, do you know I have been expecting Muriel all day. I thought she would be sure to call on Lorraine."

"She ought to have done so," he returned in a vexed voice ; "but I suppose she has forgotten all about it. I hope, Mrs. Herbert," with a friendly glance at her, "that you will excuse our unneighbourly behaviour ; my sister is not very strong, and sometimes is indisposed to make efforts."

"A lame excuse, Gavin," returned Ellison smiling; "but never mind, we will not discuss Muriel. Tell Cousin Louise that I shall bring Lorraine round to see her to-morrow morning, there is no need for her to be ceremonious. In the afternoon I shall have to drive into Dorchester; Mrs. Tucker has a list of wants to be supplied."

"Shall I drive you both over in the dog-cart?" returned Colonel Trevor. "I am going in myself, so there is no need to take Mollie. Whitefoot wants exercise; Stanton shall walk in and be ready to take the horse, and when you have done your business you shall meet me at the *Green Dragon*."

Ellison looked pleased at this suggestion.

"Will this suit you, Lorraine?" she asked courteously. "We shall go up to Brae House to luncheon, and then Colonel Trevor will drive us over to Dorchester. It is rather a charming idea; my cousin drives so well, and Whitefoot goes much faster than Mollie."

"But Tedo," objected Lorraine. "I could not leave Tedo all day."

"Dear me, I forgot all about the child," returned Ellison, knitting her brows. "Let me think a moment how we can arrange it. Gavin, if Mrs. Herbert sits in front with you she can easily take Tedo. Dorcas can give him his dinner and bring him up to the house before we start. Will not that solve the problem, Lorraine?"

"Yes, thank you; but," hesitating, "will not Tedo incommoder Colonel Trevor?"

"Not unless he gets my whip, the young rascal. All right, Ellison, you and Mrs. Herbert are booked for to-morrow. Now I must go, for I have about fifty letters to write; good-bye, Mrs. Herbert. Are you coming to see me off, Ellison?" But he need not have asked the question, for she had already risen from her seat.

Lorraine watched them as they walked slowly down the garden path. "What good friends they seem," she said to herself; and then she leaned back in the window-seat and indulged in a delicious fit of musing until Ellison returned and took up her work; then she raised herself and began to talk.

"I like Colonel Trevor, Ellison," she said in her frank way; "he was so kind to Tedo, and so nice altogether. He is not young—over forty I should say—and how the Indian suns have burnt him. He is so thin and brown, he reminds me of Don Quixote; but of course one can see he is a very clever man."

"Yes, and he reads a great deal. He always says he had no time for reading in India—that there he was a student of men and not books. But he seems to be far better informed on most subjects than other people; we have such interesting conversations sometimes, but this afternoon he was quiet; he owned he was thinking of something." Ellison said this quite innocently; she had not the faintest idea that she herself was the cause of his unusual abstraction.

"When he is not talking his expression is a little sad," observed Lorraine. "It is several years since his wife died, is it not?"

"Yes, more than eight years ; but he has never quite got over it. Helen was such a beautiful creature ; I have only looked at her photograph, but it seemed to me that I had never seen a more lovely face, and her disposition was so sweet, too. Other people have told me that, so no wonder he has been long in getting over his trouble, poor fellow."

Lorraine sighed ; it was always a matter of grief to her that she had been unable truly to mourn her husband ; she felt inclined to envy Colonel Trevor the poignancy of his regret.

"I like him all the better for being so faithful to his wife's memory," she said softly. "I never like people to forget. 'Lord, keep their memory green.' Do you remember that quaint old prayer in the Christmas story ; one is tempted to say that sometimes even now."

Ellison's smile was her only response ; she seldom discussed abstract questions unless Gavin mooted them. She sewed on diligently, and Lorraine watched her until another question rose to her lips.

"Colonel Trevor has a sister then—the Muriel you were talking about. Is she nice, Ellison—is she like her brother ?"

"No, indeed, you would never take them for brother and sister, she is very much younger than Colonel Trevor. Muriel is my age ; there were two other sisters between them, but they died some years ago. Muriel's health has not been good. She is one of those people who make the most of their little ailments ; she is not robust, but I sometimes fancy she is stronger than she thinks herself, and I know this is her brother's opinion. Muriel is terribly lymphatic, she hates any exertion."

"Then you are not fond of her"—in rather a disappointed tone.

Ellison seemed surprised at this question.

"I never asked myself if I were fond of her or not," she said, with an amused smile. "I never put questions of that sort to myself. Muriel is nice in her way : but I have no special affection for her. I do not understand her—she always seems to me a discontented, fanciful young person. I often lose patience with her, and long to give her a good shaking. Are you shocked at me, Lorraine—you look very grave ?"

"I think it is a pity to lose patience with a person because one cannot understand them. Of course I am talking in the dark, as I do not know Miss Trevor ; but from what you say she seems to have a good deal to bear."

"What makes you think so ?" asked Ellison, rather taken back at this remark. "She is better off than most girls ; she has a beautiful home, plenty of money, an affectionate mother, and a brother who is as good to her as he knows how to be ; but then he is good to everybody."

"He does everything, in short, but love her," returned Lorraine quickly. "Ah !" as Ellison gave her an astonished glance, "have I made a right guess—is there no real sympathy between them ?"

"Really, Lorraine, I had no idea you would be so quick. I never meant to talk about Muriel at all; but, as we have said so much, it would be better to say a little more, for it would never do for you to think me prejudiced or unkind. Muriel and I do not hit it off, that is true, but then I could say the same of the Mordaunt girls or Laura Holt. Girls have never been much in my line—they always exercise my patience; but Muriel is excessively trying to me, and I am not at all surprised that her brother fails to understand her. He was so many years in India that she was quite a stranger to him, and they have no sympathies in common. I believe Muriel is clever; but she keeps her knowledge to herself. But I might talk on for ever about her, though I doubt if you would comprehend matters. You must see Muriel and judge of her yourself. I am sure you will be charmed with Cousin Louise—she's a dear woman, and everybody says so."

And then Ellison laid aside her work, and Lorraine went in search of her boy.

The evening passed as pleasantly as the rest of the day. Ellison had letters to write; but she brought Lorraine two or three books for her choice; the luxurious chair and reading-lamp were adjuncts to her comfort. When she raised her eyes from her page, they rested on Ellison's placid countenance with satisfaction. Ellison always dressed herself carefully, her soft grey evening silk, with its dainty finishes exactly suited her. She never adopted a youthful style. When she wore her black velvet at the Brae dinner-parties, Mrs. Trevor told her son that Ellison was certainly a handsome woman.

Except in winter the blinds and curtains were never drawn over the great bay window. From her seat Lorraine could see the white moonlight streaking the lawn with silver. How peaceful it all was! In all her life had she ever known such peace? Already she loved Ellison. Ah, if Ellison would only love her! "She has opened her house to me; but she must open her heart too," thought Lorraine, for her nature made imperative demands on her fellow-creature for affection. Nothing else satisfied her—those she loved must love her in return.

CHAPTER VII.

A STUDY IN BLACK AND WHITE.

THE next morning when Lorraine woke she found it impossible to remain quietly in her room; so she dressed herself and Tedo, and directly they had finished their early repast she carried him out.

The dews were still heavy in the meadows, so she turned her steps in the direction of the village, leaving Brae House on her left, and passing some fenced-in fields where sheep were feeding she entered a steep, narrow lane that seemed to wind slowly under the shade of elms and beeches. Tedo was heavy, and she often had to pause and

rest herself ; but she was bent on seeing the village in its morning freshness and stillness, and after a somewhat weary climb she had her reward—Highlands was before her.

Yes, there was the institute and the church with the vicarage behind it, the infant school, and the long stretch of broken common, with its gorse and blackberry bushes, and the blue blackness of the firs closing in the view.

An old grey horse, a donkey, and some geese, were apparently the only living objects to be seen ; the sun shone on the peaked red and yellow roofs of the cottages, white roads intersected the common. Ah, they were at work in the forge, she could hear the regular clang of the hammer beating out the hissing metal, and a file of cows fresh from the milking-shed passed slowly before the open door of *The Waggon and Horses*. She had reached the main street of the village, and resting against the palings outside the blacksmith's cottage, she feasted her eyes on the charming prospect, while Tedo played beside her ; then taking his hand they stood for a long time looking in at the open door of the forge, where John Drake, a fine, powerful-looking man was shoeing a cart-horse. He glanced curiously at Lorraine as he wished her a civil good-morning, and Lorraine, true to her sociable instincts, at once commenced a conversation, and she grew so interested and took such a liking to the honest blacksmith that she forgot the time until the clock on the school-house close by roused her.

She was late for prayers, and Ellison looked at her with reproachful eyes when she entered.

"Where have you been, Lorraine ? You have been hurrying yourself, I can see that," for Lorraine was flushed and breathless.

"You must forgive me, dear," she returned, with a penitent kiss. "I have been down to the village, and Tedo and I were so amused standing at the forge that I forgot all about breakfast."

"You have been carrying Tedo all that way," exclaimed Ellison, in a shocked voice, "and Fernleigh Lane is so steep, too ! " and then she mentally resolved to speak to Sam Brattles without delay about the donkey. "Indeed, you should not use up your strength so early in the day. You are not accustomed to these long walks." But Lorraine only laughed and defended herself.

"You are very sensible, Ellison ; but just put yourself in my place—I am like a prisoner set free and intoxicated with my freedom. It is like living some fairy tale. Wandering about when the rest of the world is asleep or only just waking up, everything has a different look ; one cannot describe the beauty and freshness. Those dark woods, how I long to explore them and those low hills at the back of the village ! "

"All the same you are very tired, Lorraine," returned Ellison, with practical kindness, as she poured out a cup of delicious coffee for her cousin. "You must remember," she continued gently, "that though your health is good, those months of hardship and hard work have

tried you a little ; last night you were so tired you could scarcely hold your book. I thought every moment you would fall asleep," and Lorraine could not deny this. She knew Ellison was right, and that insufficient food and mental trouble had told upon her constitution ; her spirit was greater than her strength ; it would be months, perhaps years before she would recover from the effects of those unhappy years. Sorrow stamps indelibly, and even on her healthy nature its impress would only grow fainter by degrees. Ellison's kind heart had grasped this fact, and though she had not yet learnt to love her cousin, she was sufficiently interested in her to feel troubled when she saw Lorraine's flushed, tired face and the inky shadows under her eyes.

Under the pretext of wanting some dusters hemmed she ensconced Lorraine comfortably in the bay window after breakfast with her boy beside her, and went about her household duties, holding countless interviews in the still-room.

No one entered the sitting-room. Tedo got tired of play presently and fell asleep, and lay curled up like a puppy with his head in his mother's lap. Lorraine let him lie there, and went on with her conversation with John Drake. She was still at the forge, of course, and the hammer seemed ringing a merry tune against the anvil, "The Men of Harlech" or "Charlie is My Darling" ; and how droll, she had never known before that cows were shoed ; but, of course, that was her Cockney ignorance, she would know things better when she lived in the country. But, dear me, all those cows and no cow-shoes ready ! No wonder John Drake began to look bothered as he made the sparks fly ; it must be distressing to any blacksmith to have a dozen cows to shoe and no shoes—and here Lorraine began to rub her eyes.

"You have had a nice long nap, and Tedo, too," observed Ellison tranquilly, "and I hope you both feel rested. Never mind the dusters," as Lorraine began to look ashamed, "they made an excellent pillow for Tedo, and Dorcas will finish them this afternoon. It is time to get ready for our luncheon at Brae House, that is why I was obliged to wake you ; but, really, it went to my heart to do it, you were sleeping so sweetly."

"I suppose I was more tired than I knew," returned Lorraine apologetically ; "but, oh, to think that I have slept away this lovely morning. Sonny, you must come with mother while she dresses. I will not be long, Ellison." But though Lorraine spoke with animation she moved languidly, and in her heart she would have been better pleased to have remained quietly at home.

Brae House was a roomy, well-built modern residence. It had been almost rebuilt by Colonel Trevor's father, and only a small portion of the old house remained. The stables were new, and also the conservatory, and as comfort and not splendour had been the aim, the interior was admirably fitted for the wants of a large family. As the family was at present small, the large dimensions of the living

rooms, and the number of unused apartments, gave Brae House that barrack-like air of which Colonel Trevor had complained.

The front door stood open, and Ellison, without knocking or inquiry, conducted her cousin through the wide hall, with its handsome pillars and walls covered with pictures, stags' antlers, and curious weapons, and down a broad lobby.

"Mrs. Trevor is always in her morning-room until luncheon," she explained, "unless she is at work in the conservatory," and she was right. In answer to her tap a melodious "Come in" bade them enter, and a tall, handsome-looking woman rose quickly from her seat and greeted them warmly.

"This is very kind," she said, retaining Lorraine's hand a moment. "It is so friendly of you, Mrs. Herbert, to overlook our deficiencies in this way. Muriel or I ought to have called on you yesterday, we are such close neighbours; besides, as Ellison's connections, we should have been the first to welcome you to Highlands."

"Never mind, Cousin Louise," returned Ellison hastily. "Lorraine would not wish you to stand on ceremony with her; she is just as pleased to come and see you to-day; so there is no need for excuses."

"My dear, I have simply no excuse to offer," returned Mrs. Trevor quaintly, "unless you call natural indolence and procrastination excuses. I was hard at work in the conservatory all the morning, and far too lazy to move off my couch all the afternoon, so I contented myself with remarking to Muriel at luncheon that it was clearly her duty to call on Mrs. Herbert. I do not remember that she disputed the fact, only at dinner Gavin lectured us both rather severely on what he termed our want of manners. As I thought Muriel deserved the lecture, I held my tongue, and let him have his say. Now, Ellison, you are laughing, you always laugh when I try to explain things properly."

"Cousin Louise, you are so absurd. Look at Lorraine, she is laughing too; don't you see you are making things worse. We know, of course, that Muriel ought to have called, and that you were both dreadfully lazy; so you may as well leave off blaming Muriel and take your own proper share, and then perhaps we will forgive you."

Mrs. Trevor shrugged her shoulders, and looked at Lorraine with a pleasant smile.

"Dear Ellison is a very decided person, is she not, and so outspoken. Do you always say what you mean, and do what you ought, Mrs. Herbert? I am afraid that is not the Trevor habit. 'Oh, mother, how I hate oughts,' my daughter said to me once when she was a tiny, wee child, 'oughts are such nasty disagreeable things'; and, do you know, in my heart I agreed with her. Children sometimes grasp a truth wonderfully. Ellison will tell you that Muriel and I detest oughts still."

It was impossible not to laugh, and Lorraine did so heartily, there

was something so infinitely droll in Mrs. Trevor's voice. She had a bewitching smile, it was brilliant and sweet at the same time.

Lorraine was charmed with her, as Ellison knew she would be. Everyone admired Mrs. Trevor, though she was over sixty and made no attempt to conceal her age. There was a *naïveté* and sprightliness of manner that made people think her much younger than she really was. More than once she had been taken for Colonel Trevor's step-mother; they looked far more like brother and sister, people said, than mother and son; even the loss of a good husband and two lovely daughters had not sobered Mrs. Trevor, except for a time, while Colonel Trevor fully looked his age.

Ellison always said there was something Irish about her cousin Louise. Her quick changes of mood, her drollery and flow of spirits, her warm heart and little tempers, her hot fits and cold fits, and casual impractical ways were rather after the Irish type; but she was always affronted if this reached her ears, and declared she was English to the backbone.

She was an affectionate mother; but her son often found her trying, and her want of depth puzzled him. She was sensitive and yet she was dense, and neither of her children guessed that her light-hearted manner often concealed deep-seated restlessness. She might laugh and make jokes and seem outwardly happy; but she never forgot her husband and children, or ceased to mourn for them. With all her frankness she was reticent on some matters. If she could have spoken to Gavin and Muriel of their father and sisters, it would have been better for her and them; Muriel would not have thought her mother shallow, and Colonel Trevor's respect would have been deepened, and his masculine sense of fitness satisfied.

It was not surprising that Lorraine was struck with Mrs. Trevor, for she was certainly a beautiful woman—her features were fine, and, considering her age, she retained her complexion wonderfully. There was a strange picturesqueness about her—her grey hair was piled up on her head, and over it she always wore a lace lappet fastened under her chin with a small diamond brooch; it was singularly becoming to her, and the grey hair had almost the effect of powder in adding lustre to her bright, dark eyes. Envious critics called her style affected, and hinted that Mrs. Trevor was a little too anxious to keep up her reputation as a beauty, and studied her appearance too much; but she always laughed when such hints reached her.

"Every woman ought to be as handsome as nature allows her to be," she would say. "If I like to wear a lace lappet over my hair, no one has any right to accuse me of undue vanity. I only wish, other people would follow my example—Mrs. Mountjoy, for example; she would look less scraggy and skinny if she had a comfortable piece of lace pinned under her chin. I always think of the Red Queen in 'Through the Looking-Glass,' when I see her; how her sharp chin would hurt one."

"Fashion?" she would say another time, "my dear—I set my own fashions. Every woman over fifty ought to know how to dress herself becomingly. When any one asks my advice, which they seldom do, and then they never follow it, I say to them, 'Don't tell me your age, I know you do not wish to do so; it is criminal to be old, we all know that; but if you are over fifty wear black. Don't let a colour come near you except in your bonnet; good materials—silks, satins, velvets—nothing can be too rich, and lace—plenty of white, black, or soft yellowish lace about your neck and throat.' Would you believe it, they all turn up their noses and walk off in disdain. 'What dingy ideas, my dear Mrs. Trevor—black, perpetual mourning. I am sorry to say our tastes differ,' all in a staccato, you know, and the poor deluded women go off to bedizen themselves in the last fashionable tint, which does not harmonise in the least with their fading complexion. Oh, I lose patience with them, they have no sense, no eye, no taste! Don't think me conceited, Ellison, for you know I have no paltry vanity of that sort; but if ever people called me a beautiful young woman, they shall call me a beautiful old one, if I have to wear a mob cap and drawn satin bonnet to keep up the illusion," for on the subject of dress Mrs. Trevor could be eloquent. Ellison was after her own heart in this matter, and she often told her so, and before ten minutes were over, Ellison's sharp eyes had found out that Lorraine's appearance was giving Mrs. Trevor great satisfaction. When Colonel Trevor came into the room just before luncheon, and began to talk to Lorraine, Mrs. Trevor took the opportunity of saying as she showed Ellison some new fancy work:

"I like your Mrs. Herbert, Ellison. She is well-bred and interesting-looking. She will be a nice companion for Muriel. Her manners are charming; but she looks as though she wants rest and feeding-up."

"She has had too long a walk before breakfast. It exhausted her, and she has been asleep most of the morning. I am so glad you are favourably impressed, Cousin Louise, and I hope Muriel will take to her. By-the-bye, where is Muriel?" But at that moment the young lady herself entered.

CHAPTER VIII.

MURIEL.

IN spite of Colonel Trevor's interesting conversation, Lorraine had more than once looked towards the door as though she were expecting someone, and a moment before Miss Trevor appeared she had said in her frank way, "I am looking for your sister. I am so anxious to see her."

If this speech surprised Colonel Trevor, he did not say so. "My sister is a little erratic in her habits," he replied quietly; "we often

do not see her until luncheon. She has a big room in the turret where she exercises her hobbies in private. No, please do not ask me what they are"—in pretended alarm as Lorraine looked at him in a questioning manner—"I never go in for other people's hobbies. I believe my sister is a great reader. I know she gives large orders to our local bookseller. Ah, here she comes; and this gong reminds me that I am to take you in to luncheon." But Lorraine did not hear the latter part of this sentence. She was looking curiously at the tall pale girl who was moving so languidly across the room.

She greeted Lorraine politely but with rather a chilling gravity of manner, and the young widow's bright smile and cordial handshake met with slight response. But Lorraine had felt the limp coldness of the girl's hand, and had drawn her own conclusions, and when Mrs. Trevor said in a reproachful voice, "Muriel, you have one of your bad sick headaches," she knew that she had been right.

Muriel slightly shrugged her shoulders. "That is nothing new, mother," she returned, rather ungraciously. "But Gavin looks impatient; the gong stopped quite three minutes ago," and at this hint Colonel Trevor again offered Lorraine his arm.

Lorraine tried not to feel disappointed. She had come to Brae House warmly prejudiced in Muriel Trevor's favour, and disposed to take her part. It was evident that Ellison misunderstood her, but it was impossible not to feel a little repelled by the cold indifference of her manner; a headache was no excuse for such utter want of graciousness. There was also a hardly-concealed touch of sarcasm in that remark about the gong, clearly it was a hit at her brother's punctuality. As she sat exactly opposite to Lorraine during luncheon, the latter had plenty of opportunity of studying her closely, the headache was evidently severe, for she ate nothing, and only drank some mineral water.

Lorraine never found it so difficult to take stock of anybody; when luncheon was over she had not made up her mind whether Muriel Trevor was good-looking or absolutely plain. She would have said decidedly plain, only the features were certainly good, the mouth especially; her hair was unbecomingly arranged, strained off the forehead, and coiled heavily at the back; but it was of a beautiful chestnut tint, a rich ripe brown, and was evidently abundant; a sallow complexion, want of animation, and lack of expression, were her chief defects. Very likely she suffered from the peevishness of chronic ill-health, or perhaps her temper was not naturally amiable. There was a repressed irritability of manner, a concealed antagonism, that found vent in quiet little stinging speeches. Lorraine noticed this whenever Colonel Trevor spoke to her; she could find no fault with his manner, it was perfectly pleasant, but for some reason it seemed to jar on Muriel. After a time she made no effort to join in the conversation, but sat plaiting her table-napkin with restless fingers until Mrs. Trevor gave the signal to rise from the table. Colonel Trevor

went off to the stables to give some order, and his mother took Ellison to the conservatory to show her some new arrangement of ferns, and Lorraine found herself left alone with Miss Trevor. They were in the big drawing-room, which was very pleasant in this May afternoon, with the scent of jonquils and wall-flowers; both rooms opened into the conservatory, where Mrs. Trevor and Ellison were pacing up and down in the sunlight.

Miss Trevor looked at them a moment. Then she said abruptly, and as though she were repeating a lesson: "Should you care to see the conservatory, Mrs. Herbert? we can go there if you like." Lorraine would have liked nothing better, for she was passionately fond of flowers; but her unselfishness would not allow her to enjoy anything at another person's expense.

"I think it would be far better for us to stay here," she returned gently. "I shall have plenty of opportunities, I hope, of admiring those beautiful flowers; but the glare and heat would certainly make your head worse. I can see you are in severe pain, and you ate nothing at luncheon."

A faint flush crossed Miss Trevor's face.

"You are very kind," she said a little less coldly, "and if you are sure you do not mind, perhaps it would be better to avoid the glare of all that glass. I am not fond of tropical heat, though my mother loves it, and spends a good deal of her time there. The conservatory is her hobby."

"Ah, we all have our hobbies," returned Lorraine quickly; and then she checked herself and laughed as though she were amused; "but if any one were to ask me what mine was I should be at a loss to answer. I think my first hobby is to try and understand human nature as well as I can. I do like diving into the recesses of other people's minds, and finding out their motives and wishes, one has such grand finds sometimes. Don't you think the study of human nature dreadfully interesting?"

Lorraine had no idea that she was going to say this; but her thoughts often came tumbling out in this impromptu fashion when she least intended it; but Miss Trevor looked as astonished as though some one had let off a rocket suddenly in her face. This was not the sort of drawing-room talk to which she had been accustomed; her mother's flow of words, though they always charmed people, were to Muriel like the babbling of some bright little rivulet that came from some bubbling spring underground and led nowhere.

Only a flotilla of paper boats could have sailed down that sparkling little rivulet of trickling water, thought Muriel contemptuously; but her eyes grew large and puzzled when she heard Mrs. Herbert's remark.

"Do I find the study of human nature dreadfully interesting?" she repeated slowly, as though she were revolving some insoluble problem. "It is a study I have never attempted. I draw my idea of human

nature principally from books ; it is safer, I think," as though debating with herself. "We have the wisdom of all the ages to guide us ; that is surely better than relying on our own observation."

"I expect you are far cleverer than I," returned Lorraine with a shake of her head. "You are a great reader, your brother told me so before luncheon, and I know so few books."

"My brother knows nothing at all about my tastes," returned Muriel, her manner freezing again, and the slight illumination in her eyes fading utterly. "I suppose he did not give you a list of my studies ?"

"Oh dear no," replied Lorraine frankly, "he seemed quite hazy on the subject. I think his sole remark was, that books were your hobby. I hope you do not consider me impertinent, Miss Trevor ; but I should so like to know your especial study. There, you see, I am astride my hobby as usual. I never see any one without wanting to know their chief interest in life. Don't you see," naively, "every one is a piece of unmapped country. Now that is not my own idea," as Muriel looked impressed at this ; "I read it somewhere ; wait a moment, I shall remember the passage directly ; it was Sir J. Stevens said it. 'Every man has in himself a continent of undiscovered character. Happy is he who acts Columbus to his own soul.'"

"That is beautiful," returned Muriel in a low voice—she had a deep musical voice, with wonderful chords in it. People who did not like Miss Trevor always said she had a studied manner and affected.

It was Lorraine's turn to be electrified. She discovered that when Miss Trevor smiled she looked a different creature ; no one could call her plain then ; the pity was she smiled so seldom.

"I made a note of that passage," she went on, "for it struck me directly—well, that is just what I feel about people. I want to find out all their physical geography, their mountains, rivers, plains ; their tastes, pursuits, interests ; their little shoals and quicksands ; it is frightfully, it is awfully interesting. One is always exploring, and yet there are vast regions still to explore."

"It sounds grand ; but I do not understand it," returned Muriel with greater animation than she had shown yet. "I have never tried to read people in that way ; people mostly bore me ; they are so shallow, they say the same things, and they say them over and over again ; it is hot, or it is cold, they have troubles with their servants, or with their children's health ; or it is politics and shooting so many head of game ; ah, how they weary one. When I listen to my mother's friends all talking round her tea-table, I say, yes, that is just as the sheep jump through that big gap in the field—you know what I mean. How often I have watched them, the foolish things ; one jumps, and then all the others follow ; there is a rush and scurry. But what is the good of it ? the grass was as good in the field they left."

A bright humorous smile crossed Lorraine's face ; after all she had been right—the girl was interesting—she could talk if she liked. If only they had not been interrupted just then ! Miss Trevor was thawing ; her odd unconventional speech had made an impression and created an opening ; in common parlance, they were getting on as fast as a house on fire. But unfortunately the other ladies joined them, and Ellison informed her that the dog-cart was coming up the front drive, and that Dorcas and Tedo were walking up the shrubbery.

This turned Lorraine's thoughts into another channel directly : she had not seen her boy for two whole hours. She started up from her chair impulsively to meet him, and Muriel followed her.

Mrs. Trevor squeezed Ellison's arm significantly. "I thought so," she said, when the door had closed on her daughter, "Muriel has taken a fancy to her ; I never heard her talk to a stranger before. When Amy or Constance Mordaunt come she is almost rude to them ; little Laura Hall is quite shy of her ; she never troubles herself to entertain them in the least. Her brother is always telling her so, it vexes him dreadfully to see her so indifferent to our friends ; but you heard her just now."

"They were talking very busily, certainly," returned Ellison. "I think Lorraine has a happy knack of drawing people out ; but Muriel looks very ill. I suspect she has been keeping late hours, from her looks ; it is really very foolish of her to neglect her health in this way."

"It is no use speaking to her," returned Mrs. Trevor sadly, "you ought to know Muriel by this time. Gavin makes the same mistake. He tells her outright when he thinks she is unwise, but it does no good, and he will find it out for himself one day. He was lecturing her at breakfast-time, that is why she is put out with him. He saw the turret-room lighted up long after midnight. Muriel was so angry. I am afraid she spoke to Gavin very improperly, for, as I told her afterwards, it is Gavin's house, not ours, and that he is master here ; but I could make no impression on her. She would insist that he was not her master, and that he had no right to spy upon her little ways, and then she began on the old troublesome subject. Why could we not go to the Dower House ? Gavin did not really need us ; we were preventing him from marrying again. That is Muriel's strong point, she will insist that Gavin wants his house to himself ; but I do not intend to believe her ; it is all nonsense and temper on Muriel's part."

"I am inclined to agree with you," replied Ellison, who had often been over this ground before. "Poor Cousin Louise, it is very hard for you. I wish Muriel would behave better to Gavin. He may be a little masterful and decided—men often are—but a sister ought to understand and make light of his little defects. Now we must really go, or Gavin will be late for dinner."

When they went into the hall they found Tedo and Colonel Trevor playing at hide-and-seek among the pillars, and Lorraine watching

them with delighted eyes. Muriel had disappeared. Tedo was captured with difficulty, and lifted on to his mother's lap, and Ellison established herself on the back seat of the dogcart. Colonel Trevor took the reins, and they started off, Mrs. Trevor kissing her hand from the porch.

As they drove out of the gate Lorraine looked up. Yes, that must be the turret-room ; she could see a tall figure standing in the window ; Muriel was evidently watching them. Lorraine waved her hand, but she could not be certain that there was any response ; then she settled herself to the enjoyment of her drive.

The road to Dorchester was singularly beautiful. For nearly two miles the road skirted the Redlands woods ; the dark firs, the broken ground—with gorse and furze—the glimpses of meadow-lands opened up new vistas of interest every minute. Dorchester evidently lay in a hollow, for at times there was quite a deep descent. Now and then the road narrowed, the branches of the trees met overhead, and the sunshine filtered pleasantly through the green leaves. They drove at a good pace, but Lorraine felt no uneasiness. Colonel Trevor was evidently a practised Jehu, and he and Whitefoot understood each other.

It was a delightful afternoon to Lorraine. Both her companions were amused at her artless expressions of pleasure as they sat at the little round table at Masterman's, enjoying their tea and scones. Of her own account she began telling them about her life at Brussels, and then of some weeks that she had once spent in the Bavarian Tyrol.

"In those days life used to be a perpetual picnic and feast," she went on. "When I was very tired and low in Beaumont Street I used to shut my eyes and try to imagine that I was a girl again. It was a miserable make-believe, but I think it refreshed me. I used to try so hard sometimes that I have almost smelt the roses on old Marie's stall, and could see her brown, wizened old face and dangling earrings quite plainly. Oh, those roses and the great crimson peaches, how lovely they all were ; but," with a queer little shrug of her shoulders, "I doubt if my dream of the fruit-market improved the flavour of weak tea and dry bread."

Colonel Trevor gave her a quick, interested look, but said nothing. Ellison shook her head.

"Beaumont Street is an interdicted subject. You may talk as much as you like about Switzerland or the Tyrol ; I love foreign descriptions ; Colonel Trevor is always furnishing me with Indian sketches—his Anglo-Indian reminiscences are wonderfully amusing. Now, really we must begin our shopping, and keep the rest of our chat for the return journey," and as this was only sensible advice no one offered any objection, and Colonel Trevor took himself off.

Lorraine found plenty of amusement in watching Ellison make her purchases. She was an admirable business woman, she knew exactly

what she wanted, and never tried to drive bargains. Miss Lee was evidently well known in Dorchester; in every shop she entered the master always left his customer to speak to her, and, if possible, to serve her. She was very pleasant in her manners, Lorraine might think her at times a little condescending, a trifle too decided for her years, but no one is quite perfect, and by the end of the afternoon she admired Ellison more than ever.

Tedo was tired out long before Ellison had finished her business, so she advised her cousin to sit down at Masterman's until the dog-cart was ready. He was fast asleep when they fetched him, and fretted a little at being disturbed; but he soon quieted down in his mother's arms. The return journey was slower. Ellison insisted on walking up the steep hill with Colonel Trevor as he led Whitefoot. Lorraine would willingly have joined them, but she could not leave her boy, so she sat contentedly looking up the shady road, while the soft evening air played on her face.

A sudden sense of well-being, of full satisfaction made her heart swell almost painfully—could she ever be happier than she felt this evening? Her boy was well; his future and hers was assured. Ellison was not one to do anything by halves. The old bad life was past and over; her poor Ralph was at rest. It was dreadful to think that she could not truly mourn for him; that was the worst of all; but surely it was her duty to be happy now. "I need not doubt that there is work for me to do here," she went on; "if one only waits, one's work will surely come. If only Ellison will love me," and then she smiled and sighed, and wished she could hear what they were saying; but their voices were low, and she could distinguish nothing.

The talk would have interested her. Colonel Trevor was speaking to Ellison about his sister. He was relating their disagreement at the breakfast-table, and giving her his version. He really wanted Ellison's advice and sympathy, and as usual she was very ready to give them.

"I am really losing heart about Muriel," he finished. "I find it impossible to get on with her; she resents what she calls my interference; but, surely, in my position and at my age, it cannot be wrong to offer a sister advice?"

"Certainly not," returned Ellison decidedly; "you are master of the Brae, Gavin, and have every right to make your own rules; Cousin Louise is always saying so. She takes your part and blames Muriel for answering you as she does."

"It was very bad this morning," he returned gravely. "You know how I hate scenes; and if one cannot have one's breakfast in peace, I shall just go back to my old Indian custom and have my chota hati in my room; bickering at breakfast spoils one's digestion for the day."

"Muriel is ill; any one can see that. She has been sitting up over her studies and injuring her nerves. She was not in a condition to take advice this morning, and so her temper got the better of her."

"I cannot help all that," he returned impatiently. "It was my duty to say what I did—that it was folly to sit over her books at midnight, and that I begged for all our sakes that she would keep better hours. Perhaps I put my foot down a little more than usual; but her manner riled me—women can be provoking if they choose—she had no right to answer me as she did; but when my mother told her so in the kindest way, she got up and left the room."

"Poor Gavin! Yes, I understand it all. Muriel's temper is very, very faulty. She ought to be so good to you. No, you have nothing for which to blame yourself; every man has the right to be master in his own house."

"I am glad you think so"—looking at her tenderly. "What a comfort it is to talk to you. I have been rather in a bad temper myself to-day."

"You, Gavin; what nonsense! There, I had better jump in now as we are nearly at the top of the hill. You must drive as quickly as you can, or you will be too late."

Colonel Trevor seemed in capital spirits during the remainder of the drive. As they drew up at the gate of Brae Farm, Bairn came out to welcome them. As Ellison caressed him she suddenly remembered something.

"Mrs. Herbert would like one of Juno's puppies," she said. "Can you spare her one, Gavin?"

"Certainly," he returned promptly. "Which shall I send her—Tweedledum or Tweedledee; they are both fine little fellows?"

"Oh, we will leave that to you; but he must be handsome and amiable; but I don't think I much admire your choice of names! The puppy will be rechristened, I can assure you of that."

"Then Mrs. Herbert shall not have one at all," was the unexpected reply. "Mrs. Herbert, surely you would not have the bad taste to rechristen a puppy that I sent you?"

"Not if you particularly wished me to retain the name," she returned, rather perplexed by his plaintive tone.

"No, I thought not. You are far too kind-hearted to hurt any one's feelings. I will bring down Tweedledum for you to see; he is a real beauty, and will beat Bairn into fits when he grows up; but he must be well looked after; his pedigree is most respectable, and he has not had distemper yet."

"Lorraine, how could you be so absurd?" observed her cousin, as they walked together to the house. "Colonel Trevor was only in fun. Fancy binding yourself to keep that ridiculous name. You ought to call him Chief or Keeper, or some suitable name; but Tweedledum!"

"It is very long, certainly. I shall have to shorten it somehow; but how very kind of Colonel Trevor to spare me one of his puppies."

"Not at all; he wants to get rid of it. I knew that when I suggested it; but Juno's puppies are worth having, and one more

dog about the Farm will not matter," and having put things in this matter-of-fact light, Ellison went briskly into the house to prepare for the evening meal, leaving Lorraine to follow at her leisure.

CHAPTER IX.

A MORNING WALK.

THAT evening, as they sat at their work in the bay-window, enjoying the fine sunset, Lorraine began to question her cousin about the inhabitants of the vicarage.

"You have not mentioned them, Ellison," she went on. "You have told me so much about the Earnshaws at Price's Folly, and old Mrs. Langton at Ferncliffe, and her companion Miss Holt, and that Redlands is deserted because Sir John and Lady Chessington have gone to India for a year, but you have not spoken of the vicarage people." But as she said this Ellison looked very grave and put down her work.

"No, but I was going to tell you, only there is so much to say about everything. There is sad trouble at the vicarage ; our poor old vicar, Mr. Yolland, has had a stroke of paralysis, and his doctor has ordered him complete rest and change for a year. They left Highlands about three weeks ago. They are at Hastings at present, but are going shortly to Taunton where their only son has a living."

"That is why the vicarage had such an uninhabited look then. I could only see one thin line of smoke from a solitary chimney, and most of the blinds were down."

"Yes, it is to be put thoroughly into repair. There is something defective about the drainage, and one or two of the ceilings are down ; they expect to have workmen in for three or four months ; Mrs. Yolland told me so herself. She owned it was a sad pity as they could not let the *locum tenens* live there, and if he should be a married man with a family it might be very difficult for him to find lodgings near. There is only Mrs. Drake's—I believe she lets three bed-rooms with the sitting-room—for they would hardly go to the *Waggon and Horses*. Tom Brattles is unmarried and does not trouble himself with lodgers ; besides, his brother Sam, my bailiff, lives with him ; and the other cottages afford very limited accommodation."

"Is the *locum tenens* married then ?" asked Lorraine, who was as much interested in the politics of Highlands as though she had lived there all her life.

"That is what I cannot tell you—for at present he is a myth. One of the curates from Bramfield came over from Saturday to Monday and put up at the *Waggon and Horses* ; but the churchwardens,

Mr. Earnshaw and Mr. Tarrant, are in treaty with some clergyman, I believe, for the entire twelvemonth. It is very provoking altogether, for Sir John is so good-natured that he would willingly have offered Redlands ; but now he has made other arrangements. Some of his friends and connections are coming down for the shooting, but until September the house will be under repair."

"Oh dear, what a pity!" observed Lorraine naïvely. "How dreadfully you must miss your friends."

"Yes," returned Ellison tranquilly. "Lady Chessington was a very intimate friend. I liked her best of all my neighbours, though she was a little melancholy at times. You see they lost their youngest son about two years ago—he was such a nice boy—he died at Rugby from the effects of a blow at football, and she has never quite recovered it or Sir John either. Their eldest son is with his regiment in Burmah, and they have gone out to see him."

"What an excellent plan ; nothing could be better. Why are you smiling, Ellison, in that amused way ?"

"I think you do amuse me a little," returned her cousin quietly. "You have only been here two days and yet you seem as interested in all the people as though you had lived here for years. I do not think I have ever talked so much about my neighbours as I have these two days ; but I can see your curiosity is not a bit satisfied."

"It grows with what it feeds upon, you see. Poor Lady Chessington ! of course you must love her."

"I do not say that ; love is a rather strong word for a mere acquaintance ; but we are on pleasant terms of intimacy. She used to come here very often, and I dined at Redlands every fortnight—Sir John never liked dining alone, he is very sociable. Yes, I should miss them a good deal if I were not so busy, but I think I miss the Yollands more. He is one's clergyman, you see, and he always preached such sensible sermons, they seemed to do one good ; and then one is so sorry for poor Mrs. Yolland."

"Yes, indeed, it must be a great trouble to her."

"It has nearly killed her. It is she who has always been the invalid. She had a weak chest, and never went out in the winter ; but she led such a busy life. She used to have working meetings for the South of London—one for us gentry, and one for the respectable mothers—Mrs. Drake and any of the cottagers. She gave them tea, and read to them an amusing book, and they very much enjoyed it. I half-promised that I would carry it on next winter. I thought Miss Spencer, the infant-school mistress, would help me ; but I shall have you now."

Lorraine cordially assented to this ; she thought it an excellent idea for her cousin to gather her neighbours round her for charitable work, and commended the scheme warmly. Ellison looked pleased, and as it was already a *fait accompli* in her mind, she made a mental resolve to send to Pryce Jones for patterns of long-cloth and flannel.

The evening passed almost too quickly, and even Ellison looked surprised when Ruth entered to set the chairs for prayers ; but as punctuality was absolute at Brae Farm, she put down her work at once. When she had dismissed her household, and gone round the place with Mrs. Tucker and Bairn, she was at liberty to dawdle and gossip as much as she liked ; and as Lorraine declared she was not tired, and that she never felt more wide-awake and averse to go to bed, they spent another half-hour looking out on the moonlight, and talking in that desultory pleasant fashion that most women love.

The next morning Lorraine had a surprise. She was in her room getting Tedo ready for a walk, when she heard the gate click, and the next moment Muriel Trevor's tall figure passed up the gravel walk.

Early visitors were very undesirable in Ellison's opinion, and no one but Muriel would have invaded the privacy of the mistress of Brae Farm at an hour when she would be making up her accounts, or interviewing her bailiff ; but Muriel's visit was to Mrs. Herbert, as she bluntly informed her, and Ellison tried not to smile as she sent a message to summon her cousin.

Muriel looked a little disappointed when Lorraine entered in her hat and jacket. "Oh, are you going out ?" she said abruptly. "I thought it would be much too early ; but, of course, I would not think of detaining you this lovely morning."

"It is a lovely morning," agreed Lorraine cheerfully, "and Tedo is wild to get out and pick buttercups and daisies ; he calls them butterflies and day-days. I was only going into the Brae Woods ; why should you not join us ? Ellison is busy"—looking at her formidable pile of account-books—"and will be glad to have the room to herself. If you are not tired"—with a glance at Muriel's pale face—"I think the air would do you good."

"So do I—thank you for proposing it," and Muriel's manner was quite animated. "But before we start, Ellison, I must give you mother's message. She wants you and Mrs. Herbert to come to dinner to-morrow. There will only be Admiral and Mrs. Earnshaw, and Captain Faucit—he is coming down for a couple of nights ; but mother is very anxious for you both to come."

"We shall be delighted," began Ellison, and then she saw an expression of embarrassment on Lorraine's face. She coloured and looked at her cousin.

"I hope you will go, Ellison," she said meaningly, "but I am afraid that I must ask you to excuse me." And then she added bravely : "I have not provided myself with dinner-dresses, you know."

"My dear Mrs. Herbert, what does that matter ?" and Muriel seemed quite amused. "Mother and I are very unconventional, we do not mind in the least what people wear, do we, Ellison ? Neither of us could accept such an excuse for a moment."

"I know what my cousin means," returned Ellison with her usual tact. "I gave her no time to replenish her wardrobe ; but, Lorraine,

I really think for this once Mrs. Trevor will excuse any little deficiency. Am I right, Muriel? Would not your mother be pleased to see Mrs. Herbert, even if she makes her appearance in a plain black gown?"

"I can answer for mother," replied Muriel so pleasantly that Ellison regarded her with secret astonishment. "She will be delighted to see Mrs. Herbert, even in a gown of sackcloth and garland of ashes," and at this they both laughed; and so it was settled. Lorraine was too sociable by nature to need much persuasion. Vanity had lain dormant for many years, and her unhappy married life had made her rather careless of her appearance than otherwise; but as they left the house together Lorraine detected herself studying Miss Trevor's gown rather critically. She had evidently no taste for dress; everything was well-made and fitted admirably, there was no fault in the cut or style; but the cold, quakerish grey, unadorned and without the faintest relief, only made her complexion more decidedly sallow. A darker tint, a touch of bright colour was needed to give warmth and tone; it was a pity, Lorraine thought, that Miss Trevor should not have inherited her mother's taste; she probably refused to be guided on such matters, and preferred her own faulty standard—and in this she was perfectly correct. Many and deep were the groans of Mrs. Trevor over dear Muriel's deplorable want of taste, and her preference for dull neutral tints. "She is colour-blind, I believe," she once said to Ellison in a tone of half-comic disgust, "or she has imposed some penance on herself. Last year it was a dirty sage green, the most odious tint to blend with a sallow complexion, and she varied it with a yellowish-red—a perfectly indescribable shade, something like rhubarb and magnesia with a dash of senna in it. I went on my knees metaphorically to beg her to burn that gown; I even offered to refund the nine guineas that she had paid for it, but she only stared at me and said I did not understand æsthetic dress—æsthetic rubbish I call it."

Tedo demanded "butter-fies and day-days" before they had reached the gate, but Lorraine was inexorable.

"No, Tedo, you must let mother carry you across the big field and then you shall have as many buttercups as you like," and it was pretty to see how the little fellow yielded; evidently he was not spoilt. When Lorraine took him up in her arms he put his arms round her neck and pressed his cheek against hers. Tedo had inherited his mother's loving disposition, and was quite as demonstrative in his way.

"How strong you are," exclaimed Muriel enviously. "I could not carry that child for a dozen yards without fatigue."

"I daresay not," returned Lorraine, smiling. "Yes, I used to be very strong, but things have taken the strength out of me a little. I never felt so tired as I do now; good health is indeed a blessing, Miss Trevor. I have never been thankful enough for it; one does not count up one's blessings often enough, I say that to myself some-

times. But I am afraid," in a sympathetic voice, "that it is not a blessing that you enjoy ; you seem to me very far from strong."

"You are right," in a low, dejected tone, "but very few people do me so much justice. I am supposed to be fanciful and to have fads. What makes you so liberal-minded, Mrs. Herbert?"

Lorraine laughed.

"Any child could see you were suffering severely yesterday, you looked only fit to be in bed ; to-day you are better, but you are still very weak and languid."

This was such unusual treatment ; there was such a delicious inflexion of real sympathy and kindness in Lorraine's tone, such evident understanding, that Muriel's starved sensibilities made instant and grateful response. No one had dealt with her wisely ; her peculiar temperament needed careful management. Her mother's excessive tenderness was provoking, and only increased her irritability ; her brother was far too brusque and bracing ; Ellison too condescending, her good sense and robust health were almost wounding ; snaffle and curb and spur, they were not for her thin-skinned and morbid nature. "The heart knoweth its own bitterness," said the wise man ; and through the ages no words have been truer ; but no one guessed how bitter the rind of life was to Muriel Trevor.

"I do not know that there is much amiss with my health," she said presently, as they walk'd slowly across the Brae meadow ; "anæmic, that is what they all say, a want of strength and vitality ; it does not sound much, does it, Mrs. Herbert ; there is no interesting or mysterious disease, you see, it is only 'the little rift within the lute.' But it is wonderful," she paused here, and there was a deep melancholy in her voice, "it is strange how it deadens the life music."

Never had Muriel Trevor made such a speech, even in her own home. It was Lorraine's caressing voice that had drawn it forth. Sympathy is a lever strong enough to move a world ; but how often it is misapplied, or rusted for want of use.

Lorraine made no answer, but her friendly brown eyes rested on Muriel's face ; they were quite eloquent enough.

"It is not that I feel so ill, but that I never know what it is to feel quite well," she went on. "Do you know how a creaking door jars on one's nerves, well, I am always creaking and feel jarred, the world has scant pity for nerves ; one day people load you with sympathy, you are ill, you must have every attention ; but the next day they have grown a little weary, it is want of effort then, a grievous giving way to morbid feelings."

"Yes, yes, I know exactly what you mean, it is all too painfully true. Poor Miss Trevor, I am so sorry for you. Yes, my son, you shall walk now, you have been very good ; shall we sit down on this tree trunk to rest while he gathers us some bouquets. Be off with you, Tedo, yellow buttercups for mother, and pink and white daisies for the lady," and Tedo went off chuckling with delight, to behead

countless flowers, and carry off trophies of hot, mangled blossoms lovingly scrunched in his pretty hands.

It was evident that some sort of struggle was going on in Muriel's mind ; she looked at her companion and seemed about to speak, and then hesitated, but finally she burst out in a curious shamefaced way :

"It is not honest to be silent ; you are very, very kind, but I do not deserve this pity ; you would not give it if you knew how little care I take of myself ; perhaps if I were wiser, and did not do many things, I might have better health."

"What things do you mean ?" asked Lorraine gently ; "please tell me. Confession is good for the soul, you know."

"It is very strange," returned Muriel in an odd, musing tone. "I have never owned to a living creature before that I have been in the wrong. I have known you about four-and-twenty hours, and I am talking as confidentially as though we were old friends ; there is something mesmeric and uncanny in this sudden influence ; humbling as it is to confess it, I should rather like to answer your question."

"Real sympathy is always mesmeric," replied Lorraine, "but its influence depends entirely on its reality and depth. In spite of the fact that we are almost strangers, you are quite aware that I am sincerely interested. The whole thing—the kernel—the meaning, lies in the nutshell : 'Give, and it shall be given to you.'"

Muriel was silent ; she was conscious of an entirely new sensation ; to hear a text quoted out of church on a week-day was a novelty to her experience ; she was not quite sure that she liked it, and yet, how true it was.

"I see what you mean," she returned after a minute. "Well, I will tell you one of my bad habits. I am fond of burning the midnight oil ; I get interested in my studies, and I hate going to bed early. What is the good of lying awake, feeding on one's own dismal fancies ? I love to feel that every one in the house is asleep, and that I am up in my turret-room under the stars. It is difficult to explain what I mean, but at no other hour do I ever have such a sense of freedom, and stillness, and peace ; my brain is more alive, I feel less languid, and on edge. My brother has taken upon himself to lecture me pretty severely for what he terms my suicidal folly ; and as I dispute any one's right to control my movements, things are just a little strained at present. There, I have been perfectly frank for once in my life. Are you dreadfully shocked, Mrs. Herbert ?"

"I am dreadfully sorry," returned Lorraine, quietly, "for I must be honest in my turn, and confess that I am rather inclined to take your brother's side. You are laying up trouble for yourself, Miss Trevor. Tell me one thing, does not nature take her revenge in the mornings ?"

"Ah, you have me there, the early morning hours are purgatorial."

"I thought so ; you do not need lectures, your conscience must tell you the truth. You will not enjoy your stolen sweets long, they will

become bitter ; at least I hope so. You are not one to repent by halves, I am sure of that. If you would not think me hard for saying so, I feel disposed to transpose a little of my pity to your mother and brother ; but specially your mother."

Lorraine spoke in a light jesting tone, for she was a little afraid of saying too much ; but it was evident she had grazed on a sore point. Muriel coloured up.

" You think I give them plenty to bear."

" No, indeed. How could you imagine that I should hint such a thing—I a perfect stranger—but I know how mothers feel. I could not help being exceedingly touched by Mrs. Trevor's anxiety yesterday, she was so evidently concerned ; she knew in a moment that you were suffering ; it made no difference to her that it might have been caused by your own fault, she only wanted to find a remedy."

" Poor dear mother"—in a repentant tone ; and then 'Tedo made a diversion—he had scratched his thumb against some prickly shrub and his self-pity was excessive. He shed torrents of tears, and nothing but bandaging the thumb with a handkerchief soothed his terror. " Boy won't pick no more nasty fo'ers," he said rather drowsily, for he was getting tired.

" When our pleasures tire us, they are pleasures no longer," observed Lorraine quaintly. " Tedo's beloved flowers have all got thorns now ; what ungrateful creatures we are. I think I must go back now, for Tedo is decidedly sleepy. I hope you do not mind," and Muriel reluctantly turned her steps homewards.

" I shall see you to-morrow evening," she said, as they parted at the Lodge-gates. " Perhaps, after dinner, I might show you my den while Gavin and Captain Faucit smoke their cigarettes."

" That will be delightful. I shall remind you of your promise," returned Lorraine ; but as she walked swiftly, and, carrying her sleeping boy, she noticed that Muriel was standing still watching her until she was out of sight. Lorraine's arms were aching and she was sorely tired, but her heart was swelling with tenderness. " Poor Miss Trevor," she thought, " how empty her life is compared to mine."

" She is a sweet woman," said Muriel to herself. " I have never met any one like her ; directly she spoke to me my heart seemed to go out to her. What a smile she has ! But she has made me feel uncomfortable ; I wonder why ?" And during the rest of the day Muriel continued to puzzle herself why those few gentle words had made her feel as though all these years she had made some terrible mistake. That night, as Colonel Trevor paced up and down in the moonlight, thinking of his dead wife in her Indian grave, no stream of lamp-light from the turret-room vexed his sense of propriety. Brae Farm was in darkness, and Muriel, instead of lying awake, was actually sleeping placidly like a rational woman.

(To be continued.)



RISPETTI ON THE WILD-FLOWERS.

THE SNOWDROP.

I.

SWEET star of winter's night that comes to take
 A softer breath from him before he goes ;
 Like gentle hero, braver for the sake
 Of some one he would shield from sterner woes ;
 So thou most meekly lift'st thy head, with sign
 Of purity we hold as half divine,
 Fair snowdrop, fragile, yet of might serene
 To front the frosty winds, however keen.

II.

The strength of gentleness is seen in thee,
 And purity that conquers all that's base
 By its mere presence, giving royally
 With all the light of heaven in thy face.
 Thou risest o'er the earth yet held in blight,
 To show, like angel, in thy robe of white ;
 A herald angel of the Spring thou art,
 To tell that beauty stirs at Winter's heart.

III.

LEGEND OF THE SNOWDROP.

Thy legend is like thee, most simple, sweet :
 How Eve, cast out, went wandering o'er the waste
 Of flowerless earth, the snowdrift at her feet,
 When sudden came to her one, angel-faced.
 He heard her mourning ; moved by piteous pain,
 He took a flake of snow, and, breathing fain,
 Bade it to flower, while she looked grateful-sweet,
 And where he'd stood, saw snowdrops at her feet.

THE CROCUSES.

Blue, white and golden, o'er the earth to throw
 Sweet symbols of the sky and moon and stars ;
 Oh ! ye are fair and heavenly in the glow
 Ye cast on earth amid the winter's wars !
 Bare clods, by you transformed to living light,
 Shot forth in rays of yellow, blue and white ;
 What wonder that the poets speak of you
 As though ye brought a nearer heaven to view ?

ALEX. H. JAPP, LL.D.

THE TWO DUMAS.



IT would be difficult to imagine men more distinct in individuality than Alexandre Dumas *père* and Alexandre Dumas *fils*.

Both splendid dramatists — masters of their art — especially gifted with French esprit, and both eminently successful ; nothing could be more at variance than the quality of their genius or their personal characteristics. In principle, in impulse, in moral force, in the stamp engraved on each by nature, they were far as the poles apart ; yet there is every reason why no such disparity should exist.

Their surroundings were the same ; both were naturally subject to the influence of the age in which they lived, and could not but participate in the protest of the Romantics against a worn-out literature. At the beginning, both were half classic, half romantic, inclining latterly to melodrama—the one led on by predilection, the other by a keen eye to business. Nor were there many years between them. Dumas was twenty-seven when his first play was put on the stage, and twenty years after, his son made himself known by the novel with which his name is always associated, and on which, in all probability, his fame will rest. The 'Dame aux Camélias' was immediately dramatised, and is now hardly read in its primitive form ; whilst Dumas *père* is more celebrated for his romances than his plays, although 'Antony,' 'The Tour de Nesle,' and 'Mademoiselle de Belle Isle,' had, in their day, an immense popularity.

Frenchmen in general are no great readers of English fiction, and would hardly credit our feeling for Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. But where is the Englishman who is not familiar with the 'Three Musketeers,' or who has not smiled to be conscious of a positive terror lest under the faint disguise of green spectacles and dyed hands the Chevalier de Maison Rouge, heroic knight and royalist, should be recognised and led to the nearest section on his way to the guillotine ?

One of our own great masters of fiction has said of him with keenest appreciation, "Where does this Lucullus of a man find money

for these prodigious feasts to which he has invited me ?" And side by side with this most generous and heart-felt praise—a rival's praise—a distinguished Frenchman thinks Colonel Newcome a very drivelling old man, and calls George Eliot's powerful pictures of human tragedy "agreeable and delicate reading."

Personally, Dumas *père* was a Hercules *bon enfant*. His immense stature, broad shoulders, deep chest, fine throat and head, made Michelet say of him, with as much regard to his physical as to his mental power, that he was "an element—one of nature's forces." And like most giants, he was gentle and benignant. No one ever appealed to him in vain ; his motto was to do good *in an absent sort of manner* without the least thought of recompense ; he said it was the only way to avoid disillusion and to keep one's soul in peace.

His lavish expenditure, so often blamed as extravagant profusion, was only the outward expression of a genial, generous, uncalculating nature ; he always went straight to his point, not counting the cost, and his prodigality was of the heart as much as the purse. Maxime Ducamp has likened him to a cornucopia, ever ready to fill an outstretched hand, and says, "if ever a man was made to be loved, it was Alexandre Dumas."

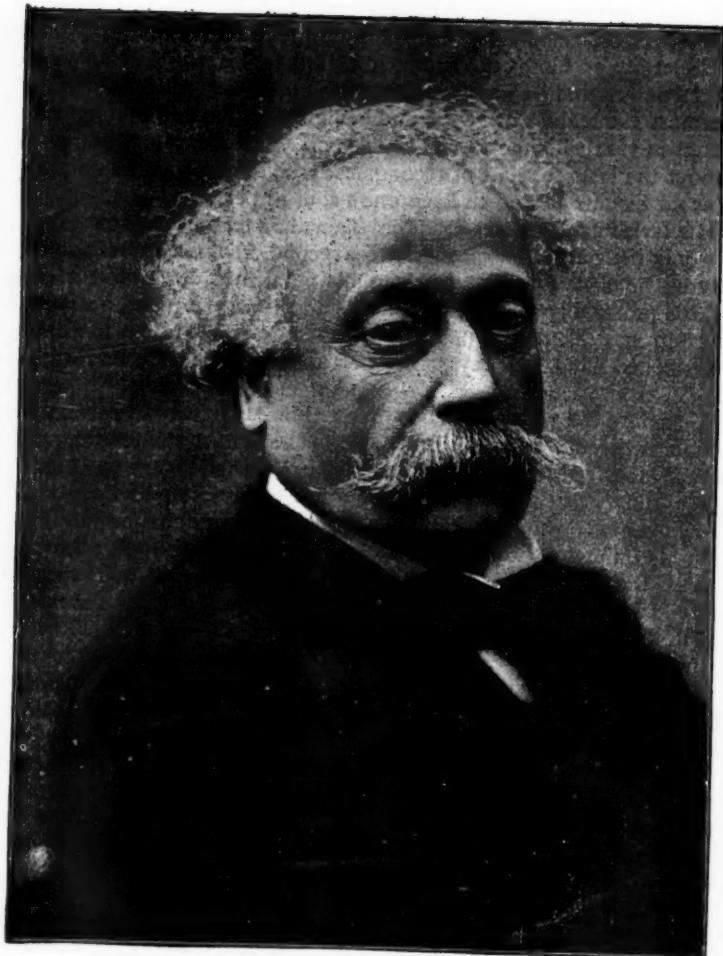
Alexandre the younger was in most things his very opposite ; his manner was cold and rather repellent ; he had a penetrating, distrustful look from very piercing eyes, which led strangers to describe him as unapproachable, the more so as he appeared to keep strict guard over his own words, lest they should betray or compromise him. With his intimates, however, he had no such reticence ; once he had broken the ice of new acquaintanceship, he unbent, and showed himself the man he was, a faithful friend, pleasant in congenial society, and in domestic life tender and blameless.

In their manner of work, and their earnestness about it, the two Dumas were much alike ; both had a purpose in view, the younger called it *a mission* ; the elder laughed loudly when it was said of him that he lived to amuse others and to amuse himself.

The "grand raconteur's" method may be guessed from his character ; it was impulsive, forcible, his rapidity marvellous. The strong imagination with which he was wholly possessed takes his readers by storm, he leads them on and holds them fast ; he is himself led on, and thoroughly governed.

His first step as soon as the central idea had flashed upon him, was to examine with his own eyes the scene of action ; this was an essential point of which his dramatic instinct led him to see the importance.

The readers of the 'Guerre des Femmes' will know that he has stood himself, and makes them stand, on the banks of the Dordogne, whilst the fishermen land their nets, and the labourers saunter home from the fields ; and they can see, as he has seen, the worthy landlord of the long low hostelry outside the door, under the swinging sign of the



ALEXANDRE DUMAS *his.*

Golden Calf, plucking a goodly capon with "ample and majestic gestures."

His characters appear before him on the scene, and then he lets them lead him where they will.

This gives them their vitality.

He described this impression (shared doubtless in some degree by most novelists) to an impatient collaborateur who was urging him to finish a play laid aside, and apparently forgotten, by saying—"I don't make plays, they make themselves. Ask a plum-tree how it makes plums, and a peach-tree how it makes peaches, and see if either can solve the problem."

His facility in the matter of dialogue was great ; but he never took up his pen till he had arranged the whole thing in his mind, the writing was merely mechanical ; yet rapid as he was in execution, once the ground-work was settled, it might be months, or even years before the work left his hands. His own account of the production of 'Mademoiselle de Belle Isle' is too racy to be spoilt by cutting it short.

In 1834 a young author burst into his room red-hot from the Porte Saint Martin, where he had read a vaudeville in two acts which had been refused. He was naturally furious. "They may say what they like," he exclaimed, "but there is something in it."

Dumas ran over the piece. "It has possibilities."

"Then let us talk it over."

"Not so ; when I take to a subject it must germinate in my brain till it is ready to come out ; as soon as the thing is done, read and accepted, I will let you know, and you can go and claim your share of the proceeds."

"But I shall have done nothing !"

"Oh, yes ! a great deal—you brought the idea, it is the acorn."

From time to time, week by week, month by month, year by year, the would-be collaborateur came back and asked, "Has it germinated ?" and was given the same reply : "Not yet."

But there came at last the solution Dumas had waited for ; it came in a flash. He saw his way out of the difficulty : act by act, scene by scene, arranged themselves in his mind ; all that was essential was perfectly complete.

He chose a Saturday when the committee of management met at the Théâtre Français, and presented himself ; he was received with acclamations, and Vedel, then the Director, inquired : "Have you brought us a comedy ?"

"Yes."

"Finished ?"

"Could not be more so !"

"Written ?"

"Written ? No, not a word."

"Then you don't apply for a reading ?"

"Yes, I do."

"You tell us your play is finished, when there is not a word of it written?"

"A play is always finished to me as soon as it is composed."

There was a good deal of laughing, and then Dumas proposed that they should decide the matter at once, which, for the novelty of the situation, the committee agreed to do. He took his place, leaning up against the chimney-piece, and told the story with all the salient parts of the dialogue.

"I was in the humour," he relates. "I spoke well: there were rounds of applause after every act, and at the end of the fifth, two rounds. 'Mademoiselle' was received without a dissentient voice, but if I had fallen down dead on leaving the committee-room, the Théâtre Français would never have possessed the play."

The habit of collaboration, so well understood in France, described as joining two or three authors together *pour avoir de l'esprit*, led to the mistaken assertion that Dumas was too greedy in assimilating other men's work, and that many of the plays to which he put his name were in great part, if not altogether, the work of his collaborateurs, but it was not so; he gave away quite as much as he received, and was always perfectly candid in the matter. He has given a full account, in his exhaustive memoirs, of every source by which he profited: whatever he borrowed became, as he said, his acorn: it germinated, till in the well-grown tree there remained nothing of the seedling in the ground.

When the same accusation was brought against Scribe, M. de Carmouche said laughing: "I have written twelve or fifteen vaudevilles with M. Scribe, and I can safely assert that there is not a word of mine in any one of them."

One thing is absolutely certain, that Dumas never accepted more than his just share of pecuniary profits, and, setting aside the baseless pretence of plagiarism, he was singularly exempt from literary calumnies or jealousies. He was an acknowledged monarch, imperial—perhaps a little imperious—but full to the brim of that grand, old-world chivalry, which breathes in all the heroes of his fine romances.

The parallel he drew between himself and Victor Hugo, regarding the manufacture of their dramas, if in his own favour, is still not without its truth. "Hugo," he said, "to be effective, cannot do without contrasting drinking-songs with church-music, and setting tables laden with flowers by the side of coffins draped in black. All I ever wanted was four scenes, four boards, two actors, and a passion. Each has his own good points, but *mine are better!*"

It was in 1869 that Dumas *fils* came forward to announce that he intended to use the stage as a moral engine; himself—after a rather stormy youth—the very mouthpiece of morality: it was in the purple and fine linen of the stage to set forth a doctrine of sackcloth and ashes, having failed to call to mind Goethe's words of warning, "A

good work of art may and will have moral results, but to require of the artist a moral aim is to spoil his work."

The young Alexandre truly spoilt his work by requiring for himself this moral aim, for in his new character of *homme sérieux* he chooses the most odious and painful situations, producing from a chaos of good intentions the most essentially unrighteous plays.

It must be admitted that his painting of the viciousness of vice is extremely vigorous.

"Alexandre is over-fond of preaching," said Dumas *père* with his usual insouciance, and it may be thought a doubtful compliment to a playwright when it is held that he has solved a new problem, advanced moral truths, and made the stage serve as a tribune where social causes are presented and discussed.

In pursuance of a system, he narrowed his conspicuous talent and natural dramatic power; wasting brilliant dialogue on commonplace people and their pitiful entanglements, turning a sort of literary specialist for what he termed the problems of the day, and neglecting a progressive plot for a series of detached scenes, so that the reader might begin at the second or third act without detriment to the sense of the play.

But his popularity is undoubtedly; he wrote for the public taste, although he had no very exalted idea of it, since he said, "The managers of theatres are quite indifferent to art, and are only guided by what pleases the crowd."

It was a business matter, and with all his wit, intellect, experience and unrivalled dramatic aptitude, he set himself to cater for his audience. Disregarding its ancient glories, the Théâtre Français has fallen on the level tableland of modern life; it is the public taste that rules the stage to-day, and the public taste is not so elevated but that it would be well to lead—rather than to follow it.

C. E. MEETKERKE.



THE TROUBLES OF A HOSTESS.

I.

IT was exactly like Alfred Warrene to send a telegram to his cousin to meet him in the refreshment room of a London railway-station. It was equally characteristic of Neville Warrene to obey the summons with much inward annoyance, skilfully masked under a pleasing society smile. That smile, coupled with an unrivalled capacity for making himself useful to his hostesses, was worth an income to him in the course of the year, yet how he longed at times for a sufficient independence to permit of his being as badly mannered as his neighbours, nobody knew but himself. He was naturally a good-tempered young man ; but to be compelled to be good tempered always, as the price of your admittance into society, is about the most fatiguing thing imaginable.

"I knew you would not mind meeting me here," said Alfred, hurrying into the refreshment-room some ten minutes late for his appointment. "I am only passing through London, and I wanted to see you particularly, so I thought it would save time if we had our luncheon here——"

"If it's to be a case of luncheon, why not go out and have it comfortably in some decent place?" urged Neville.

"Why, this is all right. Here's some cold beef—that's just what I like," and Alfred sat down at a vacant table, and began to carve the huge joint in front of him. "You won't have some? No? Why, it's capital!"

Neville looked on with a barely concealed expression of disgust, whilst his cousin emptied one plate of cold beef, and proceeded to help himself to a second. This flagrant violation of all the laws of comfort, on the part of a rich man, struck him as little short of an exhibition of imbecility.

"I thought you wanted to tell me something," he said with a shade of fretfulness.

"Ah! Of course! I want to ask you—that's to say to show you a letter—where have I put it, I wonder?" And Alfred, pushing his hat still further on the back of his head, jumped up, and began feeling excitedly in all the pockets of his dusty overcoat.

"Why do you wear that horrid great wrap in this broiling weather?" interposed the younger man. "It makes one quite faint to see you!"

"It was rather cold crossing the channel," said Alfred meekly, "and I was afraid of losing it afterwards if I took it off. I have lost so

many great-coats that way. Ah, here's the letter. I knew I had put it away safely," and he triumphantly produced a large pocket-book, bulging with loose papers. "There! Did you ever see anything like that? It's a sketch of an orchid of which there are only two or three known specimens. When I was in Brazil——"

"Yes. Very pretty—very interesting," interrupted Neville. "But I presume you did not send for me to see the orchid, did you?"

"Of course not. It was about Mrs. Tansley's letter. You see she wants me to stay there next week for a ball or something. The worst of it is, she asked me a couple of months ago, and I stupidly said I would come if I happened to be at home at the time, thinking I was quite safe. Now I have had to return to England on business, and the first thing I find lying in my rooms is a note from Mrs. Tansley, begging that I will not fail her at the last, as she has balanced her party with the greatest care."

"Well, it won't hurt you to go."

"I couldn't do it—I couldn't really," said Alfred excitedly. "I have not been to a ball since those terrible festivities sixteen years ago, when I came of age. Now, it would be nothing to you."

"True, only unfortunately I'm not asked," replied Neville.

"Well, that's just the point. I was thinking you might go in my place, you are such a good fellow, I'm sure you won't mind helping me out of a difficulty. You see I don't like throwing Mrs. Tansley over at the last—country neighbours and everything. Whereas, if I suggest that my cousin, who is staying with me—you're not exactly, but no matter—will come in my place as I am detained on matters of business. After all, you will be much more use at a ball than I am."

"Granted," said Neville. "But as you were probably invited in your capacity of large landed proprietor, it's doubtful whether I shall be a very welcome substitute."

"What nonsense you talk," growled Alfred, growing very red, as if absolutely ashamed of his pecuniary advantages. "Of course they will be delighted to get an Apollo of five-and-twenty instead of me. That's too self-evident to be worth arguing about."

"But I'm not sure after all that I care about going," said Neville, with a feeble show of resistance. "Oh, yes! I can get away from the office right enough. It isn't that. What sort of people are they?"

"Just the sort you will like and get on with. Very rich and always giving parties. I don't know them personally," added Alfred, as an after thought, "but they have bought the Hauteville's place, and somebody said they were charming. They are certainly very friendly, judging by the number of invitations they have lavished on me, but the only time I called, they were all out."

"What sized family?" demanded Neville critically.

"An only daughter, I believe——"

"That sounds well as far as it goes. Mind, if I consent to do your dirty work, you must write to Mrs. Tansley and make all the arrangements. I will go down to Warrene the night before, and you can order one of your carriages to drive me over to the Tansleys'. It's not far, is it?"

"Ten or twelve miles I think. But you shall certainly be driven over. I will write to the coachman, and tell the housekeeper to get a room ready for you," said Alfred gratefully. "If you only knew how I hate all that sort of thing. Dancing I mean and talking inanities to strangers all day. But you can't guess the misery of feeling thoroughly out of one's element."

"Well, no, I don't often feel that," remarked Neville, glancing at his own handsome reflection in the large gilt-framed glass over the fire-place. Then looking at the plain little man, in a shabby overcoat and rusty hat, who represented the head of the family, he thought, with some bitterness, that the absurdity of the law of primogeniture had never been better illustrated than when Alfred inherited a fine property, whilst he himself was doomed to a life of inglorious labour in a Government office. "I verily believe," he said aloud, "that your chief reason for going round and round the world like the Wandering Jew is to avoid having to entertain and be entertained."

"Perhaps it is," replied Alfred meekly. "But you won't forget Mrs. Tansley next week, will you?" he added anxiously. "You see, as she has made up her party, counting on me, and persists that I promised to come, I feel——"

"You can trust me," interrupted Neville. "I will pay your debt of honour. Only you must write and explain."

"Of course I will, at once. By-the-bye, did I show you those wonderful Brazilian beetles?"

"Yes, indeed, I saw all your specimens just now," said Neville hurriedly, pulling out his watch. "Can't spare another moment. Good-bye. Mind you order my room for Monday."

II.

A BRILLIANT August day was drawing to its close as Neville drove up the long avenue to Straymere Park. He had come down from town the previous day, and spent the night at his cousin's place, which was kept up solely for the benefit of a host of old family servants. Neville made himself very much at home during his short sojourn at Warrene. The servants were obviously delighted to see him, and could not avoid contrasting this handsome genial young man, with their shy taciturn master, whose prolonged absences were in their eyes a crime not to be atoned for by his really excellent qualities.

Neville's first appearance at Straymere was a carefully calculated

affair. Nobody knew better than he did the value of a judiciously timed arrival. To be introduced to a large party of strangers covered with the smuts and dust inseparable from a long railway journey is to start by being put at a disadvantage. Besides, when travelling by train one usually reaches one's destination either too early or too late for perfect convenience. However, Neville was spared all these trials, for in accordance with his carefully arranged programme, he drove up to Straymere just half an hour before dinner, looking such a favourite of fortune, with his handsome person set off by the well turned out dog-cart, as to elicit an exclamation of delight from a portly lady who was anxiously watching the drive from the door-step.

"Mr. Warrene! At last!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands buoyantly. "We had given you up, and I was just hurrying in to write a note to Mr. Hill—that's our village doctor you know, a very harmless young man. I always send for him or the curate if we are thirteen at dinner, or anyone drops off at the last. But now I needn't write as you are here instead. Not that there's any comparison between you and poor Mr. Hill, who is really so shy that, except for making the table look better, he might just as well not be there——"

"You expected me, I hope?" interrupted Neville, who having realised that he was in the presence of his hostess, had jumped out of the dog-cart. "You got the letter explaining my——"

"Now, dear Mr. Warrene, don't ask if we expected you! Don't oblige me to confess that I have been on the look-out for you all day!" exclaimed the lady with an amount of volubility that bore down all opposition. "Put yourself in my place, Mr. Warrene," she continued dramatically. "Pledged to take a party to the tennis-club ball to-morrow, and only five dancing men in the house, and one of them threatened to have the gout this morning! And here I've got together the nine nicest girls of my acquaintance; the nine muses I call them, though perhaps I oughtn't to say so as one of them is my own daughter. And all of them naturally expecting to dance the whole evening. Stella—my daughter, Miss Tansley that is—always says she can tire out any two men. And we all know what was thought of Lady Henrietta last year when she brought that troop of girls, and only one young man between the lot. I should die of shame if I had to do such a thing!"

"On the whole it is just as well that I came," remarked Neville. "Dancing isn't one of my cousin's accomplishments. Now if modesty did not forbid it, I might say that I am pretty useful in a ball-room."

"Ah! What were you saying about a ball-room?" exclaimed Mrs. Tansley, whose mind was perpetually darting off at a tangent. "If you want a really good floor you should dance in our library. It's like glass, and in the most perfect order; but we've spared no expense, and if there is a subject I understand—but Mr. Tansley wouldn't

hear of our giving a ball this week; indeed, at his age one could hardly expect him to like the fuss, though of course I manage everything, and I don't despair some evening, after dinner, of getting up a little impromptu——”

“What time do you dine?” interrupted Neville abruptly. He was not naturally abrupt, but experience was beginning to teach him that it required really strong measures to check his hostess's flow of conversation.

After a hurried comparison between the jewelled watch on Mrs. Tansley's wrist, and the hall clock, it was discovered that there was not a moment to be lost, and Neville thankfully escaped to his room in the charge of a servant. On the whole he was pleased with his reception. The house appeared large and well appointed. His quick eye had detected unmistakable signs of wealth in all the surroundings, and to a young man intent upon getting as much as he could out of his acquaintances, this meant a great deal.

The crash of a loud dinner bell some time later summoned Mr. Warrene to descend. But just as he was in the act of leaving his room, the sound of two highly pitched female voices made him draw back hastily, and stand hidden behind the half-opened door. It is always awkward to stumble into the middle of family scenes, and from the few words he had already caught, it was easy to conjecture that Mrs. Tansley had rather injudiciously selected the staircase as a fitting place in which to have a difference of opinion with her daughter.

“No necklace! no bracelets!” were the first audible words that he caught. “Go to your room and put them on at once. Fancy a girl in your position coming down to dinner with no jewellery but a little two-penny bangle! Why, you'll be worse dressed than Alice Merton!”

“Mamma, I do wish you would try to keep a little up-to-date,” replied a fresh young voice, in accents of scornful remonstrance. “No girls pile on jewellery in these days. I have a few diamonds stuck about in my hair, and if people are so stupid they can't see what money I've wasted on this dress, ten necklaces won't produce an impression upon them.”

“Do you really think so?” in a doubtful tone.

“Of course! Why, don't you remember when we dined with Lady Geraldine in London?”

Neville could not catch what followed, but apparently Miss Tansley was advancing some convincing argument, for presently he heard his hostess in a somewhat querulous voice remark that she did not see what was the good of having things if nobody saw them, but of course Stella must follow the fashion.

“And perhaps I shall take off two or three of my bracelets,” she concluded. “I don't want to look as if I didn't know what is——”

“Now, mamma, don't be ridiculous. If I prefer looking young to

looking rich is that any reason why you should rush away and tear off the family diamonds?"

"Stella, how dare you be so disrespectful!"

"Well, you have had them nearly five years, surely that constitutes an heirloom, doesn't it? Why, I have made a point of alluding to Straymere as the home of my forefathers ever since we bought it. After all, what would life be without its fictions? One must work things up a little, beginning with one's complexion."

Neville felt an uncontrollable desire to make the acquaintance of the last speaker, so after cautiously intimating his approach by upsetting a chair with as much noise as possible, he strolled out of his room. Many gorgeous looking women had he been privileged to know before, but never one who conveyed so overwhelming a sense of splendour as Mrs. Tansley when she confronted him on the staircase in full evening dress. An elaborately arranged head of hair, of that striking shade poetically termed Venetian red, surmounted a carefully devised costume of scarlet and gold brocade. There was a time when Mrs. Tansley had lived in modest greys and browns, in the fond hope of softening down her vivid colouring; but of late years she had made artistic friends, who had enabled her to appreciate her natural gifts at their full worth.

Miss Tansley in no way reproduced her mother's florid comeliness. She was small, dark, and vivacious; whilst the perfect simplicity of her beautifully fitting white dress could not fail to attract Neville's attention after the little dispute he had overheard.

"My daughter—Mr. Warrene," exclaimed Mrs. Tansley, recovering her usual smile with great presence of mind as the young man appeared. "Stella, here is Mr. Warrene. He and I are quite old friends already. We have so many tastes in common. I am sure he has an eye for colour and an ear for music, like my own. I could see it at once! My love, what is that sweet air that has been running through my head all day? Something like this it went—" and she began to hum in a fragmentary style, as she tripped down the stairs with an agility which did great credit to her years.

"Oh! come on, mamma!" said her daughter, briskly. "You know it's past dinner-time, and I have something better to do than identify all the stray things that get into your head. Why can't you keep it empty like mine?"

"For shame! You naughty girl!" cried Mrs. Tansley, playfully threatening the offender with a plump jewelled fist. "What will Mr. Warrene think if you talk like that?"

Mr. Warrene prudently kept his thoughts to himself, but five minutes later, when, singled out from a crowd of men to take Miss Tansley in to dinner, he quite made up his mind that his hostess, though eccentric, was possessed of genuine discrimination and good taste. A general favourite on account of his many social gifts, Neville was often bitterly conscious that all his services were

forgotten at the first approach of a better speculation from a matrimonial point of view. It did not often fall to his lot to be entrusted with the care of an heiress who was also the only daughter of the house.

"Well, what do you think of us all?" inquired Stella, as they took their seats at the brilliantly lighted dinner-table. "We are rather a menagerie, aren't we?"

"You seem a very pleasant party," replied Neville cautiously, determining not to make any indiscreet admissions until better acquainted with his company.

"Oh, I'm glad we look pleasant," rejoined the girl. "Appearances are proverbially deceptive, but we won't dwell on that point or it may discourage your enthusiasm for our society. I daresay you have no idea, to begin with, that we are mostly celebrities, although we look so astonishingly like other people. The old gentleman with a bald head would have been a Royal Academician years ago if the merit of his works had not aroused the jealousy of an overwhelming mass of rivals. Yes, it's quite true. I had it on his own authority. The lady in a green dress is a Russian spy; at least mamma has taken her up on that assumption, but I believe myself she is a fraud. As for my neighbour with the eyeglass, he has written a play, though owing to some whim of the Lord Chamberlain's it has not yet been produced. The rest of us are supposed to be remarkable as beauties, leaders of fashion, musicians, geniuses of some sort——"

"But I fail to see in what my qualifications for this august assembly consist," interrupted Neville.

Stella smiled sweetly. "We wanted a finished example of a conventional young man," she observed.

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Warrene, growing very red. "And if it is not impertinent, what type do you represent yourself?"

"Why, a baby might guess that!" rejoined Stella quickly. "The desirable heiress, of course! Now let me introduce you to my best friend, Miss Merton. Now then, Alice, take your turn at entertaining Mr. Warrene; I'm worn out."

The young lady thus stirringly addressed was seated on the other side of Neville, and acknowledged the introduction by such a formal bow that in spite of her undeniably prepossessing appearance he took an instinctive dislike to her. However, Miss Tansley's best friend was clearly not a person to be neglected, and suppressing a slight feeling of annoyance at being so peremptorily dismissed, he began to make himself agreeable.

It was a hard task. Miss Merton coldly acquiesced in his dissertations on the weather, the theatres, and the last royal wedding. Her regular features and dignified bearing rendered this procedure extremely discouraging. After a time Mr. Warrene ceased his efforts to maintain a conversation, and relapsed into a mortified silence.

"Do you ever go to the British Museum?" inquired Miss Merton abruptly, as if suddenly aware of her deficiencies.

Neville stared blankly. "I have heard on reliable authority that such a place exists," he began. "I fancy I have even met people who have seen it. But personally I am keeping that, and a searching investigation of Siberian prisons, as resources against the inevitable boredom of old age."

Miss Merton did not pay his little joke the compliment of even a passing smile. "I thought I must be mistaken," she replied gravely. "Very few people care for that kind of thing."

"But you must not imagine that I am totally devoid of intelligent interests," said Neville; and began to expatiate at some length on the number of high-class concerts that he had frequented during the past season. He took considerable trouble to suit his conversation to the presumed interests of his auditor. Not that he liked highly-educated women, who took life seriously, but he had a growing conviction from Miss Merton's chilly manner that she was a person of some social importance, with whom it would be advantageous to get on intimate terms.

It was a great relief, however, when Miss Tansley suddenly broke into the conversation with as much impetuosity as she had backed out of it, and rattled on with one unceasing flow of merry chatter until the end of dinner.

"Now, don't you gentlemen keep us waiting long!" cried Mrs. Tansley, as she swept out of the dining-room in the wake of the nine muses. "We must keep the ball rolling, you know, must keep it rolling. Ah, Baron! You are the only man of taste among them." These last words were addressed to a retired foreign diplomatist who had boldly announced his attention of withdrawing with the ladies. "There is a gallantry about your nation—a *je ne sais quoi*—that throws us poor islanders sadly into the shade. *Quant à moi*, I am cosmopolitan, *au bout des ongles*, as you say; but, monsieur, *mon mari* is British, very British!"

Mr. Tansley smiled apologetically from the end of the table. He was accustomed to the accusation and bore it meekly.

Half an hour later the state drawing-room all freshly decorated in pale blue and silver, was the scene of high revels. Hastily improvised charades were in course of preparation behind the curtain of a large bow window, whilst Mrs. Tansley, regally enthroned in a velvet arm-chair at the other end of the room, was expatiating to Neville Warrene on her conception of the duties of a perfect hostess.

"You see, Mr. Warrene, in our position we have to be always entertaining, so I have made a great study of the subject," she was saying. "No person would imagine how much thought I put into these parties. You won't mind my saying it, I hope, but society in the country is apt to be so provincial—so very provincial! Now I'm not content with just asking our neighbours—of course you are an

exception, Mr. Warrene. So different to all these good dull country people who can talk of nothing but county councils and the rent of their farms. I assure you I feel it very much after the brilliant artistic and literary circles in which I have been accustomed to move. But I flatter myself that I have collected a select representative gathering. Look at the Baron, for instance, a man of world-wide celebrity." Neville did look, and was so amused by watching that elderly diplomatist's advances to Miss Merton, and her contemptuous rejection of the same, that he temporarily lost the thread of Mrs. Tansley's discourse. "I am sure you agree with me, Mr. Warrene?" said that lady presently, and the direct appeal recalled him to his senses.

"Yes, of course," he said hastily, not having an idea to what proposition he was assenting.

"Ah, I knew you would. I can see that we shall agree in most things," continued his hostess, gesticulating archly with her plump white hands. "Well, as I was saying, it does not do to get a lot of young people together, and then leave them to amuse themselves. You have no idea how much arranging it requires to keep them occupied. I verily believe if I did not plan something for every hour of the day that they would do nothing but sit and talk. Stella! Stella!" she continued, elevating her voice, "when will those charades be ready, I wonder? You know I have arranged a little concert to follow, and if you are not quick there won't be time."

"Oh, do be quiet, mamma!" interrupted Miss Tansley from behind the curtain, speaking with that frank disregard for parental authority that characterised all her utterances. "Mr. Warrene," she added, "if you are doing nothing else would you like to take the hero's part in *Beauty and the Beast*? It only involves wearing a bear's-skin carriage-rug over your head and growling."

This hardly sounded a very seductive prospect, yet Neville was ready to welcome any excuse for making an escape from his present position. "I will just see if I can be of any help to them," he observed politely.

"Certainly, Mr. Warrene, certainly! But you must allow me to speak to my daughter first. The Beast, indeed! A most inadequate part for you to undertake. I couldn't hear of such a thing in my house. Surely there are plenty of other people who would make very suitable Beasts; young Hill, for instance, or Johnnie Brown." The approach of a servant with some coffee at this moment diverted Mrs. Tansley's attention, and Neville seized the opportunity to slip off unperceived.

"Well, I am ready for anything," he remarked, gliding behind the curtain, "but with the thermometer at eighty, I warn you it will be a case of a coroner's inquest if I am kept long in a bear's skin."

"Dear me! Didn't you recognise that was my little joke," said Stella calmly. "I thought you would be admiring my strategy in

rescuing you from mamma. The charade in point of fact happens to be Queen Eleanore and Fair Rosamond, and as there are at least six girls competing for the honour of being poisoned, I really don't think that my presence is required. What do you say to cooling ourselves on the terrace ? "

Suiting the action to the word Miss Tansley quietly unfastened one of the long French windows, and stepped out into the moonlight, followed by Neville.

III.

TWELVE hours later Neville Warrene sauntered down to breakfast in possession of several useful facts calculated to influence his behaviour in a considerable degree. In a corner of the smoking-room the previous night, he had struck up a friendship with the literary young man, and after listening to an exhaustive account of his grievances in connection with the unpublished play, had gradually drawn the conversation on to the present company. Few pleasures exceed that of imparting personal information. In a very short space of time Neville learnt all that he required.

"Yes, I've known them all for years," said Mr. Bannock, as he meditatively lighted his third cigarette. "I knew old Tansley before Cordelia persuaded him to retire from business—she was called Charlotte in those days. A fine woman with a singular capacity for mental development."

"You are referring to our hostess ? "

"Certainly. You did not think I meant Stella ? What a pretty little girl she was ten years ago, to be sure !" said Mr. Bannock regretfully.

"I don't see much the matter with Miss Tansley now," interposed Neville.

"On the surface she is pretty passable. Very good tempered and all that," admitted Mr. Bannock. "But she is absolutely devoid of all the higher emotions. She talks like the heroine of a sporting novel, and acts like an American." As if satisfied with this definition he closed his eyes, and smoked in silence for some minutes. "But they do get together a mixed lot here," he continued presently. "I shall have to speak to Cordelia about it ; she ought to consult me before she makes up her parties. That Russian woman now, I'm sure she has served me in a hairdresser's shop somewhere."

"That Miss Merton is handsome," said Neville interrogatively.

"Miss Merton ? Oh, you mean that girl Stella makes such a fuss about. She gives lessons or something in London. I never can make out why they have her here, for she is deadly dull. Some fad of Stella's, I suppose. I daresay she only does it to annoy her mother."

After listening to a good deal more information in this strain, Mr. Warrene rejoined the party on the following morning feeling that he held a map of the country in his hand. One immediate result of his discoveries was that he wasted no more time in trying to entertain Miss Merton. His interest as well as his dislike had vanished away on learning the insignificance of her position. Her profile even looked less regular since he had heard [that she was only a guest on sufferance ; whilst a dignified silence that enforced respect as the outcome of pride, was utterly inexcusable if merely the result of dulness or timidity.

"Now then ? What are we all going to do this morning ?" cried Mrs. Tansley, surveying the long breakfast table with conscious pride from her post behind the large silver urn. She had collected together a more than usually large galaxy of beauty and talent, as she was pleased to term it, which meant that every corner of the house was full to overflowing, and each individual guest's comfort slightly curtailed in consequence. "Now then ! What shall it be ?" she repeated. "Tennis or golf ? And some of you can ride. Stella, my love, how many can ride ? Six, isn't it, if we count the carriage horses and the luggage pony."

"Oh, mamma ! Do spare us in this heat. Tennis before lunch, and riding carriage horses along a dusty road ! We shall all be dead before the evening if we go on at this rate. What do the rest of you say ?"

It appeared that the entire party, though individually too much afraid of Mrs. Tansley to rebel, were collectively in favour of doing nothing. Immediately after breakfast some slight show of activity was maintained by several men strolling about with tennis rackets and golf clubs as long as their hostess was in sight ; but no sooner did household cares absorb her attention, than with one consent they all collapsed into hammocks and shady garden seats.

Neville was exceptionally fortunate. Whilst he was sauntering rather disconsolately along the terrace, and wondering if he owed it to a hostess, who in the main had treated him so well, to try and fall in with her wishes, he happened to meet Stella looking radiantly fresh in pink cotton, and carrying a large basket.

It soon transpired that she was going to pick water lilies on the lake, and was actually searching for a companion.

"Oh yes. I suppose you will do as well as anybody else," she observed cheerfully when Neville proffered his assistance. But he was beginning to understand her, and chose to view the remark in the light of a pressing invitation, and act accordingly.

Picking water lilies involved a great deal that was pleasant, including a prolonged lounge in a comfortable cushioned boat, safely moored under the overhanging boughs of the fine trees by which the ornamental water was surrounded. Stella was exceedingly communicative, more so than was altogether prudent, or perhaps in good

taste, considering the shortness of their acquaintance. She was just making very merry at the expense of their artistic circle, and declaring that her companion was the first civilised white man who had strayed into it for months, when her face suddenly clouded over with a look of speechless consternation.

"Unfasten the rope, Mr. Warrene," she whispered, "and get us out into the middle of the lake. As quick as you can, and don't look up."

In spite of this injunction, Neville could not resist raising his eyes when he had pulled a few yards out from the bank. "I say," he began, "isn't that Mrs. Tansley waving her handkerchief to us?"

"Of course it is," rejoined Stella sharply, "and if you don't go on quicker we shall soon be near enough to hear what she says; in which case I suppose you are prepared to undertake some violent form of exercise without further delay."

With a few vigorous strokes the boat shot out from the bank, and Neville never relaxed his efforts until they were partially hidden behind a diminutive island covered with ornamental shrubs.

"That will do," said Stella; "now I will hold the parasol over my face, and you be absorbed in picking water-lilies."

"There aren't any," objected Neville, "they don't grow out in this deep water."

"Very well, then, pretend to be lacing your boots, or picking up lost pins or something! Keep your head down, at all events, if you can't devise any other occupation. There! Mamma has given it up already," continued Miss Tansley. "If I had been rowing with some people she would have gone on calling twice the time; but she has such a strange partiality for you, as she frequently remarks."

Mr. Warrene thought this observation reflected great credit on his hostess's perspicacity, and could not help feeling rather ashamed of the duplicity with which he was now acting.

"We are safe now," said Stella, calmly, lowering her parasol and looking round.

Mrs. Tansley's portly figure could be seen hurrying from group to group upon the lawn, digging the young men out of their hammocks, and stirring the girls up from the depths of their novels. One watchful couple were distinctly visible stealing away amongst the trees at her approach.

Neville caught his companion's eyes, and they both burst out laughing. It was difficult to stay long at Straymere and preserve a perfectly respectful attitude towards its mistress.

"She means it well," rejoined Stella, calmly; "it's her idea of amusing people. We've solved the problem of perpetual motion in this house. But I'm going to have a headache this afternoon. It's a luxury I always allow myself when the house is full."

The young man found it difficult to reply prudently to this observation, and took refuge in suggesting that they should begin to search for water-lilies.

"The dear things!" cried Stella, as she recklessly plunged her sleeve into the depths and dragged at the great fleshy stems. "Supposing I wore some in my hair to-night instead of—well, instead of any other ornaments, you know. How would that be?"

"Very damp, I fancy," answered Neville, cutting off the flowers, and letting the dripping trail of roots and water-weeds slip back into the pool.

"Well, I suppose so," said the girl, plaintively; "it does not do to run counter to public opinion. For instance, I doubt whether you would dance with me if I trickled like a water-nymph."

"Try me," interposed Mr. Warrene, all the more gallantly because certain that he would not be put to the test.

"Don't be nervous," remarked Miss Tansley. "Mamma would have a fit, so filial piety forbids the experiment. Now perhaps we had better row back to the landing-place. You can carry the lilies up to the house, and I will hold my parasol over them so that they shall not fade in the sun."

Neville did as he was told, and on landing, obediently took up the heavy basket, dripping with muddy water, and carried it back to the house. He could not see Stella's face concealed behind that red silk parasol, but he had an uneasy sense that she was laughing at him all the while.

"And now, Mr. Warrene, there are several things that I want to ask your opinion on," began Mrs. Tansley, as the party dispersed from the luncheon-table that afternoon. "You remember this house before we had it? No? Why, that's unfortunate; I should like you to have seen the change. All the people about say they shouldn't know it to be the same place. But what could you expect from no taste and no money?"

"A despicable combination," murmured Neville.

"But I flatter myself we have changed all that," continued his hostess, not heeding the interruption. "The best things from the best places—nothing else contents me—and you must know I am very particular. It isn't everything that will do. Now this cabinet, for instance, is unique. There is a secret drawer on the left-hand side that the dealer assured me he had never met with in any similar piece of furniture. But one has to pay for gratifying one's taste, Mr. Warrene, one has to pay pretty heavily. And now you must come and see how I've done up the gallery."

All through that long sultry afternoon did Neville wearily dance attendance on Mrs. Tansley, striving, from time to time, to exhibit a decent amount of interest in the cracked china, Wardour Street furniture, and imitation tapestries with which both rooms and passages were profusely decorated. The details of Mrs. Tansley's interminable bargains with second-hand furniture dealers were apt to pall upon her guests; but when once at the mercy of their hostess, few people had sufficient courage and dexterity to escape before the circuit of the

house had been completed. There was a legend, indeed, to the effect that some elderly lady, having turned faint during one of these exhausting progresses, only recovered from her temporary indisposition to find that two footmen had been summoned carrying an invalid-chair, in which she was compelled to complete the tour of inspection.

Tired and bored, Neville resigned himself sullenly to his fate. Once, through a half-opened door, he caught a glimpse of the master of the house, reading and smoking in enviable solitude.

"Of course, a man of my husband's age requires a good deal of rest," explained Mrs. Tansley, apologetically. "He spends most of his day in there when we are a large party, and can't bear to be disturbed by anybody—not even me."

"Indeed!" said Neville thoughtfully. He was beginning to respect the ingenuity with which Mr. Tansley humoured his wife's whims concerning the great disparity of their ages. It pleased her to refer to him as an old man, and by accepting the situation he secured an amount of repose and immunity from worry that would have been otherwise unattainable.

At length, when the afternoon was far advanced, Neville escaped on the plea of writing important letters; but it is doubtful whether even this excuse would have availed him much if Mrs. Tansley had not opportunely recollected that the rest of her guests were enjoying themselves undisturbed.

"Dear me!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I must go and see if they are getting up something in the way of theatricals for to-morrow. Or, now it is cooler, some of the young people might like to play tennis. Mr. Warrene, when your letters are finished I hope you will join us."

Neville did not commit himself by making any reply. In point of fact his attention was much absorbed in debating whether he had caught a glimpse of Stella seated by her father's side, and heard a suppressed burst of laughter as he retreated down the passage in the wake of his voluble hostess.

This suspicion made him feel so sulky, that with an unwonted breach of good manners he came down very late for dinner, and subsided into the first vacant seat, which happened by chance to be next Alice Merton. His absence had created no remark, for the meal was a horrid informal affair, everybody being somewhat oppressed by the necessity of presently starting on a ten-mile drive. Stella did not come to dinner, either her headache was really bad, or as seemed more probable, she was reserving herself to appear with greater effect later on.

From sheer force of habit, when sitting next a good-looking girl, Neville began to make himself agreeable to Miss Merton. Her manner, though still stiff, seemed somewhat to have relaxed in severity at the prospect of the coming festivities, and with an unusually gracious smile, she promised to keep one of the first dances for him. Mr. Warrene was already on excellent terms with all the other girls in

the house, so that there was every prospect of his having a well-employed evening. With a view to resting before his impending exertions, he allowed the two closely-packed covered wagonettes to drive off, remaining lost in obscurity whilst Mrs. Tansley was loudly clamouring for his presence, and only emerging in time to claim a seat in the dog-cart which was bringing up the rear with a stray man or so.

In consequence of this delay, the ball was in full swing before Neville arrived at the assembly rooms of the little town where the tennis club held its annual revels. The first person he met in the crowded passage outside the cloak-room was Mr. Bannock, helplessly scrutinising the passers-by through his eye-glass.

"Well, have you been at it long?" remarked Neville, touching him on the shoulder.

The other started at the sound of his voice. "Oh, then you have come at last," he rejoined, with rather an unpleasant emphasis. "I thought I should have to spend the night looking for you. What's the matter, indeed! Why, Miss Tansley declares she is engaged to you for this dance, and is turning the room upside down to find you, that's all."

Much bewildered by this information, Neville hurried on to the ball-room. In the centre of the raised dais, under an ingeniously constructed trophy of tennis rackets and golf clubs, stood Miss Tansley, positively radiant with diamonds, and looking every inch an heiress. She smiled meaningfully as he approached.

"It is our dance, I believe?" said Neville inquisitively. "I must apologise a thousand times for keeping you waiting, but——"

"But you couldn't possibly remember what didn't exist," interrupted Stella. "Confess that is beyond your limited powers! I am sorry to have disturbed you," she added, leading the way to a further corner of the room, "but that Bannock man was teasing me to dance, and I really couldn't stop to think about your convenience."

"I am immensely flattered," began Mr. Warrene, but he was cut short by a brisk rap on his arm from a very substantial fan.

"Now is it worth while talking nonsense to me after the hours we spent splashing each other with water-lily roots this morning?" demanded Miss Tansley. "Am I dense enough to believe that anybody can really be flattered at being preferred to that horror? Oh, I know all about it! I am quite aware how the little viper talks about us behind our backs! If ever his nasty play comes out, I'll go and hiss it."

"I won't offend again," said Neville humbly; "but may I rub my elbow? The handle of your fan was very hard."

"No? Not really?" and Stella burst into her usual good-natured laugh, although her cheeks were still flushed with indignation. "It isn't many people who have the power to annoy me badly," she continued. "For instance, my vexation took the very mildest form

when you never appeared to claim the beautiful bit of stephanotis I had picked you."

"Oh, how good of you! Where is it?"

"In the Baron's button-hole," rejoined Stella sweetly. "Well, you see, I couldn't quite carry it about the whole evening in my hand. And he received it delightfully, with all that foreign grace we hear so much about. Plumped down on one knee in front of me in the middle of a quadrille, astonished friends grouped all around us in a circle, the sympathetic band playing its softest. I assure you it was very touching."

"Probably. But in the meantime, I have lost my flower." And Neville cast a little rueful glance at his empty button-hole.

"We shall lose our dance too, if we stand here talking nonsense any longer," said Stella briskly.

She danced well, though with a trifle more energy than was consistent with perfect grace. But at every glance Neville cast down on the coils of dark hair, in which innumerable diamonds glittered like fire-flies, his admiration for her piquant prettiness increased. Passing his life just on the outskirts of wealth, he had a genuine preference for everything that entailed the expenditure of money, and in the bottom of his heart could not imagine any woman wearing flowers instead of jewels, except as a matter of fashion.

"Will you do me a favour?" said Miss Tansley, stopping so suddenly that the next couple almost fell over them.

"Anything you like," rejoined Neville, guiding her skilfully out of the crowd to a quiet corner.

"Well then, can you ask Miss Merton for a dance or two? I particularly wanted her to enjoy the ball, and she has not had a partner yet."

"I am not sure—I will see if"—he began awkwardly.

"Mind, I don't consider that I am imposing any hardship upon you," rapped out Stella, mistaking the cause of his hesitation. "Miss Merton dances beautifully. If people had any taste she would not be sitting down for a moment."

After this any further hesitation was impossible, and with a great effort to look unconcerned, Neville crossed the room to where Miss Merton was seated alone, contemplating the gay scene with her ordinary expression of calm dignity. He was by no means devoid of nice feelings, and was acutely aware that the part he had acted, in deliberately throwing over Alice Merton to dance with the heiress, had not displayed his character in its most favourable light. Moreover, he was conscious that if the transaction came to Stella's ears, she would be justly indignant at having been rendered instrumental in slighting her friend. These considerations caused him to stumble over his apologies in a way that was very unusual for such a fluent young man; his confusion being increased by observing a faint smile flit across the girl's face, plainly indicating that she traced the

connection between her social insignificance and her partner's forgetfulness. On the whole it was almost a relief when Mrs. Tansley bore down upon them, and claimed Neville as her prey.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Mr. Warrene, positively everywhere!" she exclaimed. "As I was saying to the Baron just now, it's wonderful how a party gets dispersed at a ball. I have hardly spoken to any of our young people since we arrived. They always seem to be dancing at the other end of the room, or I see their backs out on the verandah, when I go to look for them. It's astonishing the difficulty there is in finding people, in spite of my having brought a larger party than anyone in the room. The duchess had only one carriage load, and between ourselves, a very shabby-looking lot they were! If Mr. Tansley would only have come, we should have been five more than last year; but I didn't press it. He would have been fidgeting to get away all the evening, and really, at his age, he is best at home. But now, come along, Mr. Warrene! Give me your arm, and I'll take you round and introduce you to some nice girls—really nice girls. You may rely on me. I am sufficiently young myself to know what young people like. Besides, I am ashamed to say that I was always what is called a man's woman myself! Very shocking, isn't it? But you know we can't help our natures, as I say, when people wonder that Stella doesn't resemble me more."

Luckily, Mrs. Tansley's conversation required no sort of answer; in fact, she never paused for a sufficient time to admit of one. But she was as good as her word, and introduced him to so many expectant young ladies, that his life would have required to be miraculously prolonged to admit of his doing his duty by them all. However, he danced away to the best of his abilities, and tried to enter with becoming ardour into what was evidently the chief local interest; namely, the recent amalgamation of the golf and tennis clubs, as typified by the blended symbols on the walls. Partner after partner explained to him how the committee had quarrelled, the subscriptions fallen off, and much else of a supremely uninteresting nature to outsiders.

Not another chance did Neville get of speaking to Stella, who was simply besieged between the dances, and in contradiction to the unanimous verdict of the company, he privately pronounced it a most disappointing ball. It was not until he was waiting at the door of the assembly rooms, in the chill light of early dawn, that his luck suddenly changed. A slight figure, muffled in a huge fur cloak appeared at his elbow: there was a whispered dialogue, a hurried evasion through the crowd of carriages, and in a few minutes he was driving the dogcart rapidly back to Straymere, with Miss Tansley seated by his side, talking away as merrily as if she did not know the meaning of fatigue.

IV.

It was with some slight trepidation that Neville encountered his hostess next day, feeling that it was within the bounds of possibility she might not approve of his late escapade. However, Mrs. Tansley either had not noticed Stella's disappearance on the previous night, or had her own reasons for not taking exception to it. Moreover, during the whole of the irregular meal, that might with equal propriety have been termed breakfast, or luncheon, she was absorbed in dwelling proudly on the unqualified success achieved by her party. In the first place it was larger than anyone else's. That seemed to be a point upon which she dwelt with the greatest complacency.

"After this," she said, drawing herself up, "I think we shall have a right to expect that the committee will consult me on the choice of a day next year. If I take as many tickets as the duchess and Lady Henrietta put together, I may fairly expect to have a voice in the matter."

"Mamma! Some of us will ride this afternoon," interposed Stella, prudently cutting short the recital of a time-honoured grievance. "I must go, of course, to pioneer the party, and Mr. Warrene would like to come, he hasn't said so yet, but——"

"What is it? Riding? Indeed, I should like it of all things," interrupted Neville, looking up abstractedly from a letter he had been reading. Its contents seemed to cause him some annoyance judging by the expression of his face. "How exactly like Alfred!" he muttered once or twice.

Presently he rose and waylaid Mrs. Tansley as she was leaving the room. "I hardly know how to explain it to you," he began apologetically. "My cousin has just written to say that his business did not take as long as he expected, and having an idea that you wanted him particularly for your party, he has suggested coming this evening —only for one night you understand."

"Not a word more! Not a word!" exclaimed Mrs. Tansley. "Any cousin, or friend, or acquaintance of yours will be welcome. A visitor, more or less, in a house of this size makes no difference at all! Don't mention it again!"

"Well, that's really very kind of you," said Neville, and for the moment he felt that his hostess was certainly one of the most good-natured women in the world. Also that from the first she had displayed extraordinary discrimination in recognising his personal importance. For a moment he had feared that Alfred's awkward proposal might somewhat discredit him. It was so like that excellent but dull fellow to be making a conscientious effort to fulfil his obligations when the moment for doing so was past. But it was now plain that Neville stood too high in Mrs. Tansley's favour for even this untoward

incident to make any difference. Vague undefined projects began to flit through his mind. He was not burdened by much false modesty, and besides had frequently observed that the possession of very moderate personal charms in a penniless man is the generally received equivalent for a prepossessing heiress. Of course, it was too soon to form any settled resolution, but there could be no harm in paving the way in case at any future time he should see fit to apply for Miss Tansley's hand and fortune.

With this resolution he never left her side through the long ride, and their way lying mainly along narrow paths through the woods, they gradually became separated from the rest of the party.

It was very agreeable wandering under the cool shade, with the sunbeams falling fitfully on their heads through the interlaced branches. "But the difficulty is," thought Neville, "that at this rate I shall be hopelessly committed in twenty-four hours, and I haven't quite made up my mind how Mrs. Tansley would work as a mother-in-law."

"I say! Who are those two?" cried Stella, heartlessly interrupting her companion's last sentimental speech, as they came in sight of the house. "Surely that's Alice Merton on the lawn," she continued, shading her eyes from the dazzling rays of the setting sun; "but that man?"

"I think—yes! It is my cousin," replied Neville. "He is a good old fellow, but as dense as a stone wall. Nobody except him would turn up like this when the house is full, and they can only be in the way. Besides, he is deplorably shy at the best of times."

"Oh! that accounts for Miss Merton taking him under her wing then. She always has a preference for helpless people."

"I cannot say that I find her a particularly encouraging companion."

"Ah, that's because you are too prosperous to be interesting," interrupted Stella.

Neville gave a self-satisfied smile. It was just the sort of impression he delighted in making. Things were going so well that he could afford to welcome Alfred with an air of pleasant patronage when they presently met in the garden.

"I thought I had better put in an appearance for one night as Mrs. Tansley made such a point of it," whispered the latter.

"Perhaps you are right. How do you like them all?"

"Oh, very much. That's to say I have hardly spoken to anyone yet," said Alfred nervously. "There is a lady here—a Miss Merton—that I have met before."

"Ah, I daresay you would like to take her in to dinner then better than a stranger. I will manage it for you," said Neville, with the easy air of a friend of the house. "I daresay I shall see Mrs. Tansley before long, as I am going indoors to change these dusty clothes."

As it happened he met his hostess in the hall, and was able to explain his request at once.

"Oh certainly, Mr. Warrene! Certainly! I don't think I shall be disappointing many people in giving him Alice Merton. Although Stella will have it she is so charming, I can't see it myself. It would be much wiser in my opinion to leave the girl at home to give lessons or whatever it is she does. And, stop one moment, Mr. Warrene," she continued, "I hope your cousin won't mind sleeping in the box room for one night. It's all right, you know, except that there isn't a fire-place. But there's quite a nice view from the window, and only a few boxes in the corner."

"I am afraid we are putting you to great inconvenience," began Neville.

"Oh, not at all! Don't think of it," rejoined Mrs. Tansley, in her most sprightly manner. "This is Hospitality Hall, I always say. Nothing but coming and going from one year's end to another. By-the-bye, you mustn't forget to write your name in the visitors' book. We've already had eleven more visitors than last month. But we must keep the ball rolling."

"Poor old Alfred!" muttered Neville looking round his comfortably furnished bedroom with some amusement. "It does seem a trifle hard that I should so entirely have supplanted him, that he is now only received on sufferance as my cousin. But it's not surprising. He looked like a travelling tinker this afternoon in that battered old hat. And as for conversation or entertaining people, of course he is no more use than the door-scraper. I did think of offering to change rooms with him at first, but after all he doesn't mind being uncomfortable and I do, so it's best to say nothing about it."

The next morning, when Neville saw how contented, and even cheerful, his cousin appeared in Miss Merton's society, he lost the few scruples of conscience that he had ever had about retaining those superior material comforts. Miss Merton also brightened up wonderfully under the influence of a little individual attention from Major Hawley, who evidently saw a great deal in her to admire; and Alfred Warrene watched the two almost jealously as they conversed together with animation under the shadow of the grand piano. At the request of Stella she had just electrified the party by singing "Bid me discourse" with great sweetness and considerable power; though Mrs. Tansley endeavoured to deprive the performance of as much lustre as possible by mentioning confidentially to everyone in turn that her young guest had signally failed as a professional.

"Ah, she would not be up to singing in public," remarked Neville critically. He was absolutely ignorant of music, but felt a secret conviction that Miss Merton's could not be of a high order since she failed to amuse him.

"In point of fact it does not signify in the least whether she is up



"MISS MERTON ALSO BRIGHTENED UP WONDERFULLY UNDER A LITTLE INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION FROM MAJOR HAWLEY."

to singing in public or not, seeing that she has never thought of making the attempt," said Stella impatiently. "Where mamma evolves these legends I cannot imagine! The truth is that Miss Merton's father being a London clergyman with a large family, she lives quietly at home teaching her younger sisters. I believe at times she attends concerts. Also lectures. Although clever, she is good enough to be my friend, and at my special request stays here occasionally!"

"After all, Straymere is not a bad exchange for a London vicarage," rejoined Neville Warrene, with as much of a sneer as he ever ventured on.

"We have a good cook," said Miss Tansley reflectively. "The house is well furnished, and would be comfortable for about half the number of people we usually put in it. The electric light is also a great improvement. Yet in spite of these many conveniences and advantages, I have observed that people do not often stay with us twice——"

"Why, surely Bannock——"

"Oh, I do not mean him! People one would rather not see always reappear with the greatest regularity. But, to turn to something pleasanter, if you will remind me to-morrow morning I will really get some stephanotis and wire it myself, into the neatest of buttonhole bouquets, in place of the one you lost by being late."

Most certainly Neville did not fail to remind Miss Tansley of her promise on the following day, and followed her up to the greenhouse when she went to pick the promised flowers. He knew well how to make the most of these little occasions. Nothing could have been more judiciously suggestive of friendly interest, just ripening into a warmer feeling, than the few tasteful words with which he filled up the intervals of snipping buds and wiring stems.

"You will stay over next week? Yes you must!" said Stella, as they returned to the house. "Some of these people will have gone, and there will be a less exhausting necessity for amusing ourselves, whether we like it or not, than there is now. Please don't invent a previous engagement."

Neville did not. He felt that the fates were too strong for him, and that before long the unappreciative government office would know him no longer.

"But what can be going on in the library!" ejaculated Stella. "Why, my father usually has undisputed possession of it all the morning, and nobody thinks of disturbing him, whilst now it seems full of people. And there is mamma making signs to us through the window to join them!"

Neville looked in the direction of the house and caught sight of Mrs. Tansley standing in one of the long French windows that opened on to the terrace, and gesticulating violently.

"Perhaps they are waiting for us to rehearse," he suggested. "You

know there was some talk about getting up a play; though I haven't even seen a book of the words yet."

"And I have been in vain trying to make up my mind whether the actors or the audience are most to be pitied in private theatricals," she rejoined. "I shall probably end by choosing the former fate for my own, as after all it's more amusing to hear oneself talk than other people. But come on! They really seem to want us."

In two minutes Stella was stepping lightly into the room through the open window, followed by Neville.

"Why are you all standing solemnly round the table!" she exclaimed. "Are you playing some sort of game?" Her laughing voice died away, and there was a moment's absolute silence. She stared at the assembled group in astonishment, as well she might, seeing that it consisted of both her parents, Alice Merton, and Alfred Warrene, under ordinary circumstances a most incongruous combination of individuals. "Have you all lost your tongues, like shy children at a party?" she continued flippantly, for the silence was beginning to make her nervous.

"Oh, my poor child! How little you know what is in store for you!" cried Mrs. Tansley, suddenly collapsing into an armchair, and hiding her face in her handkerchief. "Tell her about it! Tell her all!" she continued, waving her hand faintly in the direction of her husband.

The quiet elderly gentleman thus addressed looked somewhat embarrassed at the prospect of being called upon to make a lengthy explanation. "It seems there has been some slight confusion existing in Mrs. Tansley's mind," he began. "Nothing of importance at all so far as I——"

He was never allowed to finish his little speech. The prostrate figure in the armchair suddenly started up, and broke out into a torrent of angry speech.

"It may be nothing to you that our only child should be deceived by the advances of an impostor——"

"Dear me! an impostor!" interrupted Stella dramatically. "It sounds dreadful, doesn't it? Not that I know exactly what it means, but I suppose somebody has stolen something."

"Worse! Far worse!" cried Mrs. Tansley. "He has intruded himself into our intimacy and leagued with designing people who have wormed themselves into my innocent child's dearest affections——"

"If you are referring to Miss Merton you are labouring under some grave misapprehension, to say the least of it!" interrupted Alfred Warrene. He was very nervous, but spoke with a certain dignity that commanded attention.

"Can anybody explain to me what is the matter?" said Stella, appealing to the company in general.

"I imagined that I had a right to speak when my child's happiness was at stake! But it appears that this is not the case, judging by

the constant interruptions and contradictions to which I am subjected!" and Mrs. Tansley darted an angry glance at her husband who had done nothing whatever to provoke this attack. "But this I will say, and nobody shall stop me. If I ask a person to my house who seems in all ways an eligible visitor, and another person is substituted in his place without a word of explanation, and the impostor takes advantage of his position to—"

"You are not—you cannot be speaking of me!" interrupted Neville fiercely.

"Indeed I am, and with very good reason!" retorted Mrs. Tansley with equal heat. "You arrived from Warrene Court in place of your cousin, you never gave me the least hint, though you must have seen by the way you were treated—the best bedroom, and taking my daughter in to dinner, and everything!"

"Don't you think this discussion is rendering us all a little ridiculous?" interposed Stella. But nobody attended to her suggestion.

"You had the letter explaining that I was coming in my cousin's place as he thought you wanted men for your dance," cried Neville, with a crimson face. "No? Surely, Alfred, you wrote it? You must see what an impossible position I am in through your fault!"

"Oh yes, I wrote it right enough," said Alfred quietly. "I can remember every circumstance. After you left me at the station, I went straight into the waiting-room and wrote at once so as not to lose any time. I had some writing paper with me in a leather case, where—" He paused suddenly, and a gleam of memory seemed to shoot across his face. Diving into a capacious pocket, he produced the same bulging packet of papers that he had shown Neville at the station. In a moment more the contents were spread open upon the library table, and between the Brazilian beetle and the Argentine orchid lay the unposted letter.

"Of course, I am very sorry about this," said Alfred simply, when the chorus of explanations had subsided. "You can all see how it happened. Until this moment I quite forgot that I slipped the letter away with the other papers instead of posting it. The bare possibility of having done so just occurred to me when I mentioned the writing-case."

"I fancy you owe some apologies, mamma," said Stella briskly.

"Well, I suppose I must say it was nobody's fault," rejoined Mrs. Tansley. "Though it's very disagreeable to be taking one person for another, and putting Mr. Warrene to sleep in the box-room, with cotton sheets and a cracked looking-glass."

"Please don't say that, it was very comfortable," murmured Alfred shyly.

"Well, Stella, I wonder you are not congratulating your friend!" continued Mrs. Tansley, with an assumption of levity that was not altogether natural. "Don't stare, child! It appears that Alice

Merton and Mr. Warrene are old acquaintances, though they kept it a pretty close secret. At any rate they have done us the honour to become engaged under our roof."

"It was no secret at all," explained Alfred, whilst Stella drew her friend into the corner and began pouring out congratulations and questions. "It was like this," he continued, "we had met years ago at some lectures in London—on the history of Etruscan pottery, I think—"

"In the British Museum?" interrupted Neville. "Ah, I thought so!" It would be difficult to describe his condition of humiliated rage during the last few minutes. It was bad enough to realise that the amount of attention he had obtained was in no way due to his personal gifts, but merely a tribute to his imaginary fortune. But to find that the one girl in the house that he had ignored, as far as his naturally good manners would admit, was now to be elevated into a position in which she could either patronize or snub him was intolerable.

"I shall never set foot inside Warrene Court again!" he muttered. "Even if I am invited," came as a grim afterthought.

The inmates of the library were dispersing. Mr. Tansley had withdrawn on the earliest opportunity, feeling that there was not the slightest chance of getting the room to himself that morning. His wife had disappeared somewhat abruptly on noticing in the looking-glass what ravages an injudicious amount of emotion had worked in her appearance. Alfred and Miss Merton were busily discussing trains, as they intended returning to her home that afternoon.

"And what are you going to do?" inquired Stella, coming across the room to Neville. "Leave us as soon as you can pack?"

He briefly signified that such actually was his intention.

"I thought so," she said sadly, "and leave me to Mr. Bannock and the baron, as before. Now, supposing for the sake of argument," she continued, "supposing that after rearranging her hair, and thinking the matter over, mamma should come and apologise fully to you. She will, you know, and what is more she will forget the whole thing in a couple of hours. And supposing that I joined with her in begging you to stay. What should you do then?"

Neville did not answer immediately. But there was something sufficiently yielding about his expression for Miss Tansley to infer that under certain circumstances he would reconsider his decision.



THE VOICES OF THE EMPTY HOUSE.

By G. VILLARI.

THE weather was certainly hopeless. Even my optimism failed to believe that it would soon clear. The hour was nine o'clock P.M., and the rain still poured down in torrents, while the wind was blowing, as it well knows how in Italy, and was howling in the trees like a host of fiends. I was tired, hungry, soaked to the skin, and the darkness was so dense that I could not see two yards ahead.

Having been bitten with the bicycling mania, I had spent my holidays in a tour through Central Italy on my machine. Up to now my trip had proved a decided success, but why had I left the comfortable inn at S—— and set off across the long stretch of plain to T—— in such unpromising weather? It was only drizzling when I started, but ominous thunder-clouds had quickly gathered overhead, and when it was too late to turn back, and the shelter of T—— still uncomfortably far off, the storm burst in all its fury. Moreover, the roads were in such a vile state, that for the last half-mile I had been obliged to dismount and push my machine. The prospect of a couple of hours' tramp ankle-deep in mud, shoving a cold wet bicycle, was not cheering, so I peered around in search of some refuge. There were a few dripping trees by the roadside; I went under them and waited. But they offered the scantiest protection, and I was getting colder and colder every instant with standing still. I then proceeded slowly on my way, looking around to see if anything in the way of shelter was in sight; but there was nothing to be seen; all was darkness and rain.

Presently I thought I could make out a light in the far distance. I hastened forward, and it grew brighter and brighter as I approached. Now I saw that it proceeded from the windows of a large house on a slight eminence to the right. The grounds were enclosed by a high wall, and close to the road was a gate with stone pillars surmounted by quaint weather-beaten figures. Most of the ironwork had fallen out, and the hinges were broken. Evidently the people of the house paid but small attention to such details. "Still," I thought, "they will allow me to take shelter beneath their roof, and let me dry myself by the fire."

I passed through the ruined gate and walked up the long avenue of stately cypresses leading to the house. This road was, if possible, in a worse state than the one I had just quitted, and was overgrown with weeds. The house was hidden from me by the cypresses, but a sound of music proceeding from it reached my ears, and the lights

within cast bright gleams on the shining wet terrace before the house. "There seems to be a concert going on here," I said to myself, and began to feel somewhat shy of intruding on an entertainment, the more so as my clothes were hardly suitable for such an occasion. However, I could always get shelter in the kitchen or in an outhouse.

I reached the terrace at the end of the avenue, and saw before me one of those large, rambling, old Italian villas, built, probably, about a couple of hundred years ago, that are so delightful and picturesque in appearance, but so uncomfortable to live in. It was built of massive stone blocks, and decorated with stone figures like the ones on the gate-posts. Several windows were brightly lit up, and seemed to bid one a pleasant welcome. I searched for a bell, but finding none, resorted to knocking.

I could now hear the music very distinctly. A woman's voice was singing a sweet melancholy air in a high key, accompanied by a tinkly piano. I had never heard the tune before, but it might have been an operatic air of some last century Italian composer—Pergolesi perhaps, or Scarlatti. I could not make out all the words, but I remember the last line—"Ride la morte a me!" which was repeated many times with variations. The voice was a pure soprano, and evidently well-trained.

I had been listening so intently to the music, that I did not realise that no notice had been taken of my knocking. But as I was getting colder and colder every instant, I woke up to the fact soon enough, and repeated my knocks, but with no result. Then the singing stopped, and I could detect the murmur of voices and the rustling of silken dresses. Now, perhaps, they would condescend to answer my appeal. But no, no one came.

At last, my patience exhausted, I gave the door a violent kick, upon which it opened wide, creaking on its hinges. To my astonishment all was dark within, and the sounds that I had heard ceased suddenly.

I carried my bicycle in, and by the aid of its lantern inspected the entrance hall. It was a large room running right through the house, and there were remains of gilding and frescoes on the walls, but all was decayed, and dust and cobwebs covered everything. The furniture consisted of a few broken chairs and some moth-eaten hangings. The panes of the windows were all broken. The whole place had a most decidedly uncanny air about it; but I set to work to explore the other apartments to see if I could find anyone. All was darkness and decay, and the feeble light of my lantern made everything seem even more weird.

I found the room whence I thought the music had proceeded. It was a small boudoir furnished with fragments of rococo chairs and tables. One or two dark pictures hung opposite the window, and in a corner stood a small harpsichord with faint tracings of paintings. I

tried it, but all the notes were dumb. This made me feel rather uncomfortable, so I returned to the entrance-hall. Here I stumbled up against something, which at first made me start, but it turned out to be nothing more formidable than my own bicycle. This gave me fresh courage, for there is companionship even in a bicycle. It looked so very modern and matter-of-fact, and altogether so utterly unsuited to the atmosphere of ghosts.

So I set to work to find something that would burn, which was not difficult, owing to the broken furniture lying about. I had soon collected a sufficient quantity of sticks and pieces of wood, which I heaped up in the middle of the apartment, but to set them alight was no easy job; everything was damp. However, after some little time I accomplished it, and sat down by the fire to dry my clothes and warm myself. Then, after drinking the few drops of brandy left in my flask, I began to have doubts as to the reality of my experiences. "It must have been all a delusion brought on by the cold," I thought, "and the stormy night, and the deserted appearance of the house."

Then I began to speculate as to who had lived in this place, and what had happened here, but of course could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. When I felt sufficiently restored, I went out to see what the weather was doing. I saw with relief that it had cleared up considerably, and a few stars were breaking here and there through the canopy of black clouds. I therefore put out the fire, left the house with my bicycle, and closed the door behind me. At once the music began again; the same voice sang the same song again, clear and distinct. I turned round, and behold, the windows of the house were again lit up. This was certainly most mysterious. I had not been dreaming after all! Or was I dreaming still? Who could tell?

I hurried down the avenue away from that weird place as fast as I could go, and, as I passed between the gate pillars, I could still hear that sweet haunting strain: "Ride la morte a me."

After following the road for a couple of hours, I saw the welcome lights of T—— twinkling in the distance, and in a few minutes I was seated by the bright fire of the *Leone d'oro* inn, discussing a substantial meal. I went to bed, and the next morning felt as fit as ever.

Before starting, I asked our landlord if he knew anything about the deserted villa on the hill half-way to S——. He knew nothing about it, save that it belonged to a Roman family whose name he could not remember. They never came there now, and in fact nobody could live in it because "one heard things." There was no legend connected with it that he knew of; but not all the gold in Christendom would have induced him to go near it after dark.

* * * * *

Two years afterwards I was again in Italy for a short holiday, and, at an Embassy ball in Rome, happened to be introduced to the young Countess Tadescalchi. She was very charming and clever, and she invited me to her house, which was a grand old palace in which

Renaissance art and picturesqueness were combined with modern comfort and refinement. Both the Countess and her husband were fond of music, and often gave small concerts to just a few friends, among whom I was fortunate enough to be reckoned. At one of these entertainments, after several celebrated professionals and amateurs had performed, the Countess herself went up to the piano and sang an old Italian air. It seemed familiar to me, but at first I could not remember where I had heard it. Suddenly when she sang the words "Ride la morte a me!" it flashed upon me that this was the song that I had heard on that stormy night in the lonely villa, two years before. Now perhaps the mystery would be cleared up. So, lingering until most of the other guests had left, I begged her to tell me all about that haunting strain and its composer.

"That air," she said in reply to my query, "is from an opera called 'Antigone,' composed by an ancestor of ours, Camillo Tadescalchi, who lived a hundred and fifty years ago. He was intensely anxious to have his opera performed at Milan, for he hoped to win fame by it, but he died of consumption, poor man, before it could be brought out. In his last days, when too weak to move, he would often summon some of the most celebrated singers of the day to his villa of Montalto near S——, and make them sing parts of his opera. He hoped against hope that he would live to see it on the stage, and was always talking about the day when he would be well enough to lead the orchestra at Milan for 'Antigone.' His music is very charming, but always melancholy. Had he lived he would doubtless have become famous."

"But what about his villa?" I asked. "To whom does it now belong?"

"Montalto," she replied, "still belongs to our family, but it is falling into ruin. No one lives there now, because it is supposed to be haunted by poor Camillo's ghost, and also by that of the fair Bianca Fossi, one of the greatest sopranos of the time, who sang his songs to him, and with whom he was said to be in love; but these are old wives' tales. Some day I shall have the house put into order and made habitable. It is really a beautiful place, and might easily be done up. When the rats and the cobwebs, and the dirt are cleared out, the ghosts will soon depart bag and baggage. That sort of gentry find the nineteenth century much too realistic and practical for them to live comfortably."

But I had my own opinion on the subject.



A NIGHT VISION.

BY CHARLES W. WOOD, F.R.G.S., AUTHOR OF "LETTERS FROM MAJORCA," "MEMORIALS OF MRS. HENRY WOOD," ETC., ETC.



A SPANISH GLEANER.

when we are out of sight and hearing. The people would have accompanied us ; taken the horses out of the omnibus, and drawn us up to the inn, where we should have arrived like a conquering Cæsar. My Volume of Lyric is worth this recognition if they have rightly translated all the fire and spirit of my theme, all the beauty of language, charm of rhythm and correctness of rhyme—above all my Dedication to Lady Maria, a masterpiece of English and of flattery. No ; I begin reluctantly to think there must be some other cause for this demonstration. And if it is not a poetical reception, then I should distinctly call it nothing less than a disgraceful riot."

Here he paused to take breath. There was also a slight tremulousness in his voice, born of disappointed emotion. We were now going

THE train passed into Gerona, we found ourselves on the noisy and crowded platform, and in spite of the vigilant porter, safely escaped from it bag and baggage. The omnibus rattled off, with the result already described. The crowd still cheered ; a prolonged and mighty strain. As we went on, this grew fainter by degrees, yet did not cease. H. C. having replaced himself with great care began to collect his thoughts and look about him. In the dim glimmer of the omnibus lamp we saw shades of doubt and disappointment in his face.

"I begin to think that perhaps this ovation was not for me after all," he said. "They would not go on cheering insanely

up hill, and even the horses found it a tug of war. "The people would have had some trouble in dragging you up here," we remarked, as the horses toiled slowly onwards.

"Gratitude and enthusiasm will carry you through anything," said H. C. "If I were assisting at a demonstration I would help to drag a coach up the Matterhorn, and succeed or perish in the attempt. But these people evidently have some other object in view: organising a raid on the train, or proclaiming a republic, or something else equally barbarous and lawless. How dark is the night!"

We looked out. The stars had disappeared. The sky seemed overcast and threatening. The horses struggled on and we soon entered the town. As we crossed the bridge spanning the river, we noticed everywhere an unusual crowd and excitement, a flaring of lamps and torches, a sea of upturned faces thrown into lights and shadows that looked very weird and demon-like; an undercurrent of voices, a perpetual movement.

What could it all mean? We had expected to find Gerona, in spite of its 20,000 people, almost a dead city, full of traces of the past altogether oblivious of the present; a city of outlines and echoes and visions of the middle ages. We looked down the tree-lined boulevard—the very word is horrible in conjunction with the buried centuries. The broad thoroughfare ran beside the river, and the trees followed each other in quick succession. Without and within their shadows a long double row of booths held reign, and their flaming torches turned night into day, Paradise into Pandemonium.

We realised at once that a great fair held possession of the town. It was crowded with sightseers of all ages, in every stage of emotion, from apathy to delirious joy. We bewailed our untoward fate in visiting Gerona at such a time, but as it proved in the end, the fair interfered very little either with our comfort or impressions. It had its own quarters and conscientiously kept to them.

The omnibus passed on into narrower thoroughfares, where there was no trace of fair, no sign or sound of excitement, no flaming of torches. All was delightfully dead as the most advanced antiquarian could have desired. We wondered very much what we were coming to in the way of an inn, and as we wondered, the horses drew up at the *Fonda de los Italianos*.

Most of the hotels in the smaller towns of Spain have one unpleasant element about them. They have nothing to do with the ground floor of the building, which is often nothing but a cold, unlighted, deserted passage, sometimes leading to a stable yard. No one receives you, and you have to find your own way upstairs. When, as sometimes happens, there is a choice of two staircases, you will probably take the wrong one. On this occasion there were not two ways before us: we could not err. If only it were always so, as we play our little part in life, trudge our pilgrimage through the world, and take rash headers

nto deep waters—never dreaming of rocks ahead, of storms and tempests, anchors drifted and rudders lost, of damage and shipwreck !

But here at the fonda we had only one course before us : a broad white marble staircase that bore witness to a very different destination in days gone by ; the pomp and splendour of life, the pleasures of the world. At the head of this sumptuous staircase our host met us with a polite bow and bade us welcome ; and throughout Spain we never met with a landlord more intelligent and well-informed, more agreeable, more anxiously civil. We were puzzled as to his nationality. He did not look Catalonian, or Spanish of any sort ; he spoke excellent French, yet was decidedly not a Frenchman. When



A FRAGMENT OF GERONA.

the mystery was solved we found him an Italian. A man ruling very differently from our energetic hostess at Narbonne, who full of electricity and lightning herself, seemed to have the power of galvanising everyone else into perpetual motion.

Our Gerona host was quietness and passivity itself, as though all day long he had nothing to do but rest on his oars and take life easily. He never hastened his walk beyond a certain measure or raised his voice above a gentle tone. Yet like the well-oiled works of a perfect clock, the springs were doing their duty and keeping the complicated machinery in order. There was no friction and no noise, but everything came up to time. He was the last in bed at night, the first up in the morning. A tall, thin, fair man, with an

expression of face in which there was no trace of impatience, irritability, or anxiety ; no fretting at life. All his days his motto had evidently been : "Take no undue thought for the morrow." He had not dreaded evil, and if wealth had not come to him (we knew not how that was), evil days must have passed him by. He had learned the secret of contentment, and was without doubt a man of peace. Yet he had brought up a large family of sons and daughters, and therefore could not have escaped care and responsibility. They now took their part in the *ménage*, but it was evident that without the father nothing would have held together for an hour.

His youngest son was a tall, gentlemanly young fellow, who had been partly educated at Tours, and spoke very good French. His ambition now was to spend two years in England to perfect himself in the language, which he considered difficult and barbarous. "French," he observed plaintively, "is pronounced very much as it is spelt ; so is Spanish ; so is Italian—I have them all at my finger ends. But English ! It seems to me they have done their best to confound all foreigners. It is worse than Russian or Chinese."

This he related the next day as we went about the town, for we had taken his polite offer to be our guide ; and very intelligent and pains-taking he proved.

Our host's wife was as fat and broad and buxom as the husband was the opposite, and as her homely face beamed upon her guests from behind the counter of her little bureau, she looked the very picture of an amiable Dutch vrouw. Nothing less than a Frank Hals could have done her justice. Her lines seemed to have been cast in pleasant places, and her days also had been without shadow of evil ; her motto no less than her husband's : "Sufficient unto the day."

It was also evident that our host was of a cheerful disposition. He had had all his walls painted with landscapes, and if rainbow-colours predominated, he gave as his reason that they were more enlivening than grey skies and sombre shadows. Even the walls of his garden-court had not escaped the general decoration. It was a court put to many uses and was level with the first floor, bounded on one side by the kitchen on the other by the dining-room, these at right angles with each other. In many ways it was a picturesque court with a slightly Italian atmosphere about it, due perhaps to sunny landscapes on its dead walls. Orange and small eucalyptus trees stood about in large tubs. The far end was roofed and the fine red tiles slanted downwards. Over these grew a large abundant vine, bearing rich clusters of grapes in their season. Under the covered part cages were hung, with captive nightingales and thrushes that looked anything but miserable prisoners.

"In the spring they sing gloriously," said our host, looking affectionately at his birds, evidently as full of tender mercies as of cheerfulness. "I hang them outside our front windows sometimes, and



VIEW FROM THE STONE BRIDGE.

night and day the whole street echoes with the nightingales' song. You may close your eyes and fancy yourself in the heart of a wood. I have often done so, and dreamed that I was in my Italian home, listening to the nightingales on the one hand and the murmur of the Mediterranean on the other. That is one reason why I love the birds and keep them. They bring back lost echoes, and almost make me feel young again."

Pigeons and doves strutted about the yard, and were evidently considered very nearly as sacred as those of St. Mark's, for they behaved themselves as fearlessly as if the days of the Millenium had come at last.

But on the first evening of our arrival we had yet to learn the many virtues of our host. We only saw in broad outlines that we were in good hands. "Not having telegraphed, you are fortunate to find accommodation, sirs," he said as he lighted candles and marshalled us to his best rooms. "Last year at the fair we were full to overflowing; we had not an available hole or corner to spare. This year we are comparatively empty, simply because the town corporation have not organised the usual fêtes: fêtes which bring us visitors from all parts of the country. Nevertheless we may be full to-morrow."

"It is an annual fair, then?" we observed.

"Very much so," returned the landlord, "and one of the most celebrated in Spain. It begins to-night, but to-morrow is really the first day. That and the next day are comparatively quiet; the day after comes the horse and cattle fair, and the whole town is crowded with a rough and noisy set of people. I fear you would hardly think them agreeable."

"In that case our visit to Gerona must terminate within forty-eight hours," we said. "The train which brought us here to-night shall then take us on to Barcelona."

"Where you have it more civilised but will not be more welcome," said our host politely, still leading the way. The corridors were paved with stone, the ceilings were lofty. Turning into a narrower passage to the right, we looked into the yard, where our omnibus was reposing; the horses had just been taken out and were marching up to their stable. This passage led to a salon out of which our bedrooms opened; our host had given us all that he had of his best. He placed one of the candles down and lighted others, then turned to see that everything was in order. We opened the window and looked out on to the main street, long, narrow and almost in darkness. Electric lamps were visible, but only one here and there gave light. "Why is that?" we asked.

"Because," said the landlord, "we get our motive force from the river; and just now the river is almost dry. So they have to work with a machine, and the machine is not strong enough to light the whole town. That is why I don't have it in the hotel. One day we

should have brilliant illumination, the next total darkness. It is best to be sure of your ground and go on in the old-fashioned way."

"There was quite a riot at the station," we remarked; "we were told it had to do with the conscription. At one time we quite thought they were going to storm the omnibus."

"You were well-informed," said the landlord; "it is the conscription. Fathers and brothers and cousins fourteen times removed, all assembling to see the poor fellows take their departure. Generally speaking they all turn up again after a time like bad money; but on this occasion who knows? Raw recruits as they are, a good many of them may get drafted off to Cuba, with small chance of ever seeing their native land again. Luckily they are more full of excitement at a change of life and scene than of regret at leaving home. The noise as you say might be that of a riot or revolution; the Spanish are the noisiest people in the world without exception; but it is harmless and means nothing. It is the froth of the champagne, and when it subsides there is no wine beneath."

"Are the people of Gerona poetical?" asked H. C., looking rather anxious.

"Poetical, sir?" returned our host with a puzzled expression. "Do you mean to ask if they write poetry, like Dante and Shakespeare? You do them too much honour."

"No," said H. C., "one could hardly expect that of them. But do they read and appreciate the poetry of others? There was a moment when I thought that crowd at the station was an ovation in honour of——"

He paused modestly. Our intelligent landlord at once grasped his meaning. We invariably found that he guessed things by intuition; two words of explanation with him went as far as twenty with others.

"Ah, I understand," he said. "You, sir, are a poet; and you at first thought this riotous assemblage was an ovation in your honour. But I fear I must undeceive you—though you probably have already undeceived yourself. I hope it was not a bitter awakening. Still, I am enchanted to make the acquaintance of an English poet. I once saw and spoke to Mr. Browning in Italy. He did not look to me at all poetical. One pictures a poet with pale face, dreamy eyes, flowing locks, and an abstract manner. Mr. Browning was the opposite of all this. Now you, sir, with that beautiful regard and far-away expression looking out into nothingness——"

H. C. bowed his acknowledgments: our host though flattering was getting a little personal.

"You have lost your poet laureate," he continued; "and there has not been another appointed; you have no poet equal to the honour, I am told. I read the newspapers and know the leading events of every country; for though I live out of the world, I must know everything that is going on in the world. Perhaps, sir, you are to be the new poet laureate."

"Not at present," said H. C. flushing deeply as a vision of future greatness rose up before him; "but I hope to be so in time. At present I am rather young to bear the weight of the laurel wreath, which seldom adorns the unwrinkled brow."

"Sir, there is even rhythm in your prose," said the landlord in quiet appreciation. "Truth will out. But, sir, though a poet, you are mortal; at least I conclude so, in spite of your diaphanous form and spiritual regard; and I bethink me that time flies in talking, and we shall have dinner ready before we can turn round. In England, sir, being a poet, you probably feast upon roast butterflies' wings and the bloom of peaches; but—"

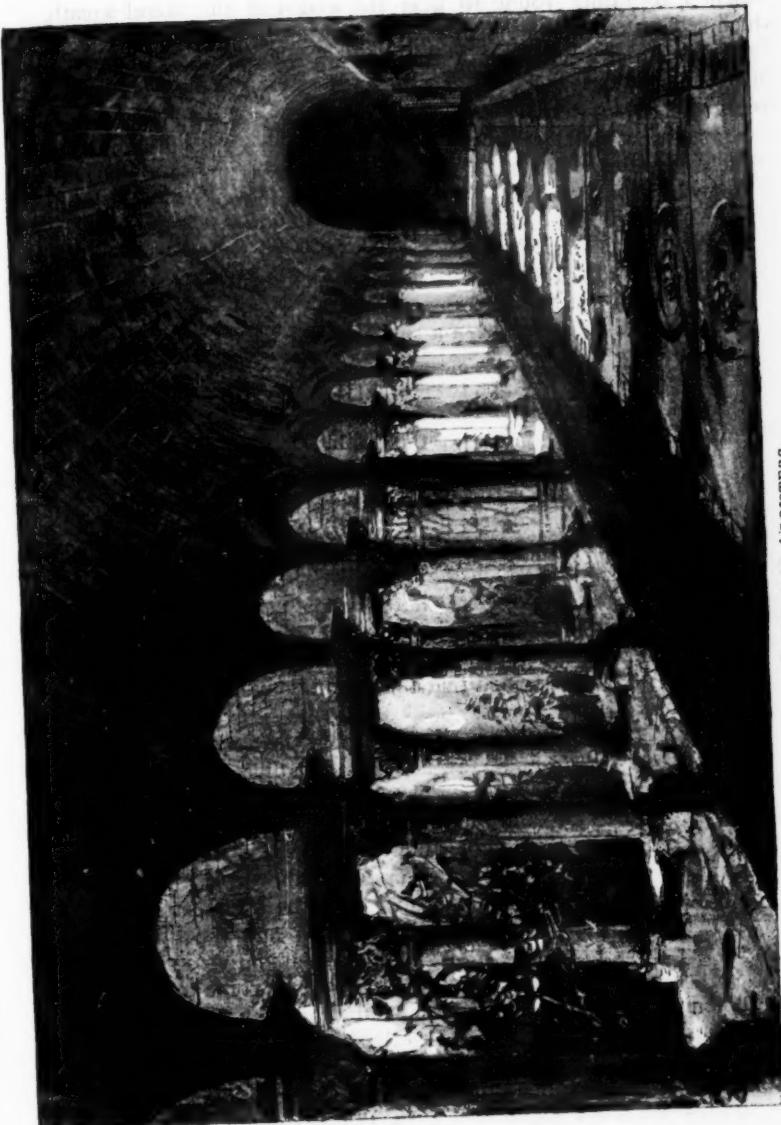
"On the contrary," cried H. C. hastily; "I have a very large appetite and love substantial dishes. Like George III. my favourite repast is boiled mutton and apple dumplings; and like the King I have never been able to fathom how the apples get inside the paste. But that does not at all affect their flavour. So we will, if you please, make ready for dinner. Do you patronise the French or the Spanish cuisine? Oh I am indifferent. It is a mere matter of butter versus oil, and I think both equally good."

Then they went off in a procession of two, the landlord carrying the flambeau. "We will look upon it as the torch of genius," said our host, "and I am proud to be the bearer of it. But methinks, sir, it should be in your hands." After this we heard nothing more except their receding footsteps.

The scene presently changed to the dining-room. At the first moment we had made for the wrong room, the only dining-room we noticed. For want of a better name it may be called the servants' hall, since it was given up to the humbler folk indoors and out. Here, too, the landlord and his own people took their repasts: and once or twice, casting a glance in passing, it was a pleasure to see how madame's broad and buxom face and capacious form was doing justice to the good things on the table. Her husband and children did not take after her; they were all very much after Pharaoh's lean kine: she looked as if she could have sheltered them all under her ample, amiable wing.

We were rather horrified on entering. A few funny-looking people, very much "sans gêne et sans cérémonie," sat at the table, which was in a state of untidy confusion. Here, we felt, it would be impossible to remain. Even H. C.'s capacious appetite would have calmed down to very moderate dimensions—but he had not yet appeared upon the scene. A door beyond opened into the kitchen, from whence came sounds of fizzing and frying and fumes in keeping, all very audible and tangible. The chef and his imps might be seen dancing about like cats upon a hot floor, but much more usefully employed.

We were beginning to grow depressed, and to thinking that after all our lines had fallen in very funny places, when the landlord



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appeared at the open door of the kitchen. He pounced upon us like one of the said cats upon a mouse, and without preamble or prologue marshalled us straight out of the room. We felt we had made a mistake and gave a sigh of relief.

"That is not your room," he said, when we were outside. "We are obliged to have two rooms. There are a certain number of people who will neither pay fair prices nor heed good manners, and these we have to put below the salt, as I have read in some of your English books. So we give them a separate room. *I* put up with them because it would not answer me to have three rooms. And then we have our meals when nobody else has theirs, and waiting and running to and fro is all over for the moment. To keep an hotel is no sinecure I can assure you, sir."

But the mistake had been a shock to the nerves it took some time to get over.

Saying this, our host led the way to the proper quarters. We found a large well-appointed room, to which no exception could be taken. The walls were adorned with the sunny landscapes already alluded to. If occasionally perspective and colouring were a little eccentric, why, as H. C. observed, we had only to think that variety was charming, and even defects were at once seen in a new light and became virtues. The room was well illuminated with gas; it was no tenebrous repast to which we were invited. The linen was snow-white. Our host's daughters waited upon us, quietly and silently, with a certain amount of grace. They were dark-eyed, good-looking young women, with something both of the Italian and Spanish about them, whereby we imagined that the buxom lady-mother was probably Catalonian.

We observed throughout Catalonia that the women after a certain age—by no means old age—all grow inordinately stout. With a shudder we felt thankful that a Catalonian wife had not fallen to our lot. Time after time a little whipper-snapper of a man, lean and shrivelled and short, would enter a dining-room followed by an enormous spouse, who came crushing down upon him like a Himalayan mountain. They would take their seat at a table, the lady with a great deal of difficult settling; and the little husband would gaze at the huge wife with all his admiration in his eyes; as proudly as if she had been the Venus de Milo come to life with her full complement of arms and legs, and draped in modest garments. The back, we reflected, is fitted to the burden; but here the order of things was reversed—it was the wife whose broad back must needs bear the burden of life.

There were no stout ladies in the dining-room to-night. At different parts of the long table sat some eight or ten people of various nations. Opposite to us were two Englishmen—or Americans—separated by a Spaniard. They were of one party yet never spoke a word to each other from the time they entered to the time they left

the room. Occasionally they mutually glared, on passing a dish, or the wine of the country, which was supplied *ad libitum*. What the *entente cordiale*—or rather the bone of contention—between them, we never discovered ; but at every meal they kept to their silent programme. It became almost oppressive. Once or twice we thought they were perhaps monks of La Trappe in disguise, but discarded the idea as too far-fetched. The Englishmen, at any rate, if one might judge by expression, were certainly not devoted to a religious life of fasting and penance. They were young and no doubt the world held attractions for them not at all in harmony with the solitary cell and the midnight mass. We never solved the Silent Enigma.

Not far from them sat a priest, who no doubt had himself helped to celebrate many a midnight mass, perhaps both in and out of a monastery. He was certainly the most interesting character at table ; and no one present appreciated more thoroughly the triumphs of the chef. Even H. C.'s boasted appetite had to yield to the priest's. The system here was different from most hotels. The dishes were not handed round, but every person or party had placed before them their own dishes, of which they took as much as they pleased. Whether the old priest was father-confessor to the ladies of the hotel ; or whether they merely had a very right and proper admiration and respect for his cloth, we knew not ; but he invariably came in for a Benjamin's portion ; and as invariably, the dishes he sent away in a very Barmecide-feast condition.

Yet it was evident that he could look severe and sit in judgment on other people. The next day at luncheon he came in and took his seat next to us. We were suffering from a miserable headache which made life a burden. Severe diseases require strong remedies. Our repast consisted of a little dry bread and sundry cups of black coffee diluted with a liberal supply of brandy. The latter was half a century old, and very much of the consistency of milk ; nevertheless its healing properties were sovereign. The old priest we say, sat next to us, and we had almost resented his not having even the breathing interval of a chair between us, where empty chairs were abundant. The silent trio were at the lower end of the table, quite a long way off. At our second cup, the priest looked anxious ; at our third, reproachful ; at our fourth and last, he could contain himself no longer. They were very small cups, oh questioning reader, and the four were only equal to two ordinary black-coffee-cups.

Possibly the priest thought that age conferred licence, seniority a privilege. He was also probably impulsive, and like all impulsive people often said and did the wrong thing. But he was evidently actuated by a pure spirit of philanthropy, which would set the world to rights if it could accomplish the impossible. Looking earnestly across the table, he spoke : and then we found he was a Frenchman.

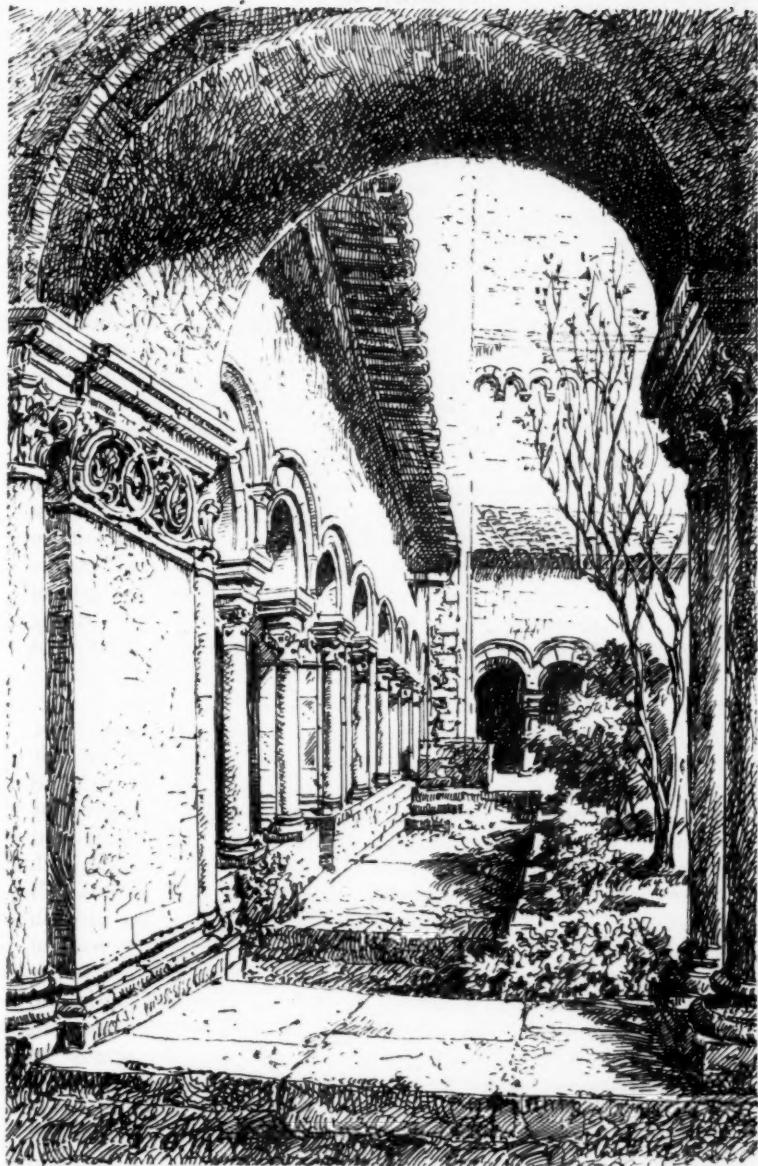
“Monsieur,” he said in his own tongue, “that is a most insidious beverage, fatal to digestion, destructive to the nerves. If I see any

one repeating the dose, I cannot, at the risk of being thought indiscreet, avoid speaking. When I count up to the fourth cup, sir, I feel they are in jeopardy. And shall I tell you why—I speak from experience. I once myself was nearly overcome by the fatal basilisk, only that in my case it was strong waters without the coffee more often than with it. For a time it was a question which should conquer, the tempter or the better nature. Then came a period in which I was wretched and miserable, yielding, yielding, fighting, fighting. Finally I made a greater effort, and vowed that if strength were given me to conquer, I would dedicate my life to the church. Soon after that I fell ill; sick almost unto death. Weeks and months passed, and I recovered to find the temptation had vanished. I hated the very sight of brandy, with or without black coffee. Mindful of my vow—I was a young man at the time—I took steps to enter the church; and here I am. And now, sir, forgive me for saying so much about myself, and for preaching a little sermon taken from real life, though time and place are perhaps not quite fitted to the occasion."

We forgave the good old man on the spot. His intentions were excellent and his sympathies evidently keen, two excellent virtues. And we did not retaliate by warning him that to indulge habitually in a Benjamin's portion of the good things of life, was perhaps hardly less fatal than a partiality for strong waters. Not ours the gift of tongue or the right to preach. We assured him that for us strong waters were no temptation, held no charm. Nevertheless if ten cups well diluted would have worked a cure, they had been taken.

The good priest shook his head doubtfully.

"A dangerous remedy," he said. "But, now, I am interested in you. I like the amiable manner in which you have received my little homily. Many would have taken fire and proudly told me to mind my own business. You arouse my sympathies and invite my confidence. Let me confess that I placed myself here in order that we might enter into conversation. Mine has been a singular life, both since I entered the Church and before it. It is full of lessons. If to-night, before retiring, you should have an hour to spare, and will give it to me, I will relate to you some passages in a very eventful career. You will say it contains many marvels. However late, it will not be too late for me. I never retire to bed before three in the morning, and am always broad awake at seven. Four hours' sleep in the twenty-four is all nature ever accords me. I have reason to believe that I shall be offered the next vacant see in the church; I could place my finger upon the very spot: and my wakeful nights will enable me to do much work. Let me hope that wisdom and judgment may be accorded. But what am I doing?" he said drawing himself up. "Here I am talking to you as if I had known you for a lifetime; giving you my confidences, betraying my secrets! What power are you exercising? What does it mean? Sir, you must



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be a mesmerist, and I have fallen within your meshes. Yet no ; I feel that I am not mesmerised, and that you are to be trusted. Yes, I repeat that if you will give me an hour this evening, though it be the dead of night, I will confide strange experiences to your ear that until now have been locked within my own bosom. And why not ? My life is my own ; I have a right to withhold or disclose what pleases me."

The words of the old priest made us feel almost uncomfortable. We aspired to no undue influence over anyone, much less a stranger. Confidences are not always desirable ; but then we reflected that confidences need not be confessions. The experiences even of a simple life must always be of use, how much more that of an active man of the world, thoughtful and observing, retentive and philosophical ?

There was something interesting and attractive about the old priest. In spite of his Benjamin's portion, he had not grown stout and coarse. He possessed a distinct refinement of face ; a face that reminded us strongly of the fine outlines of Père Hyacinthe as we had many a time watched him in a Paris pulpit preaching with so much earnestness, fire and conviction : raising a crusade against the errors and the shams both within and without the Church. When our present neighbour was a bishop, would he too uphold the good and condemn the evil and the untrue ?

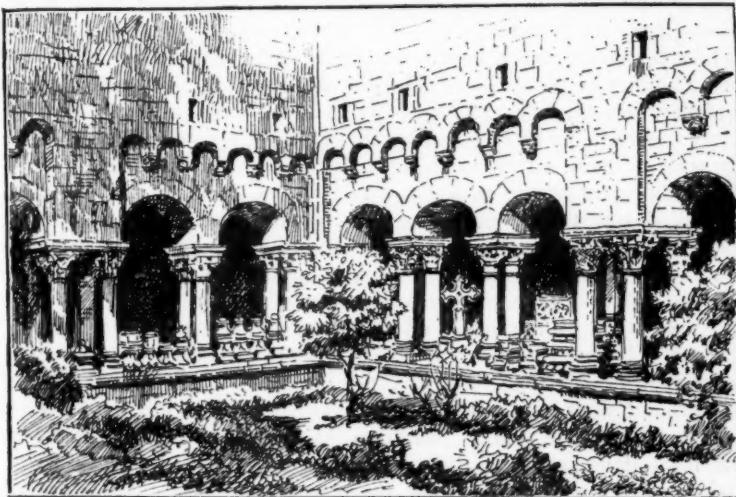
We looked closely at him and thought Nature had not been unmindful of her power. His long flowing hair was white ; the head was splendidly developed ; there was a ring and richness in the subdued voice that we felt would reach the farthest corners of Notre Dame. We asked ourselves the question, but could not answer it. The future holds her own secrets and makes no confidences. But in our interest in the old priest—we will make a slight but sufficient change in his name and call him Père Delormais—we promised him an hour, two hours if he would, and even found ourselves awaiting the interview with curiosity and impatience. And all this arose out of black coffee diluted with brandy.

But on the first night of our arrival we had needed neither one nor the other. The old priest sat on the opposite side of the table, and we noticed nothing about him but his fine and venerable appearance and his Benjamin's portions. Yet he evidently had been closely studying us. The Silent Enigma had occupied a little of our attention and wonder, but this soon passed away. The element was essentially commonplace, and left no impression behind it. The remainder of the scattered guests called for no remark whatever.

We welcomed the end of dinner, and departed to our rooms preparatory to reconnoitring the town. The rooms were only reached through a sort of labyrinth, and to the last hour we were always taking wrong turnings. H. C. had the organ of locality as well as the gift of rhyme, and the power of changing himself from a Dante into a Napoleon in the twinkling of an eye ; and we often had to call to him

from some far-away recess to as it were take us out of bound; vainly remarking that it was a little hard all the gifts should have fallen to his share. He always condescendingly replied that we must be thankful for small mercies; adding with great modesty that all his gifts and inspirations, which were beyond our ken, were almost counterbalanced by a feeling of tremendous responsibility.

We went out that first evening with all our curiosity on tiptoe. It was very dark. There were no stars shining; our small aneroid marked a promise of rain. Where we came to openings in the streets, the sky above was lighted up with a lurid glare. The surrounding district might have been on fire, or a distant portion of the town. It was of course nothing but the reflection of the countless torches lighting up the fair. Our own street was in comparative darkness.



CLOISTERS OF SAN PEDRO.

Sauntering down whither fate would lead us we came to some splendid arcades, deep and massive and solemn looking. We found that few towns in Spain possess such arcades as Gerona; so exceedingly picturesque, so substantially built that time may mellow but hardly destroy them. To-night they were not quite impenetrable; a little of the glare from the sky or the fair—the latter invisible but near at hand—seemed to faintly light their obscurity and add mystery to their finely-arched outlines. They were quite deserted; not a creature was visible; the shops were closed. There is no time like night and darkness for solemn outlines and impressions.

A few steps further on, and we suddenly burst upon the full glory of the fair. Not the glory of the sun or the moon, but of torchlights smoking and flaring, flames carried hither and thither by the wind.

Far as the eye could reach we traced them. The houses with their quaint outlines and iron balconies stood out vividly, shadowed by the waving trees. A double stream of people sauntered to and fro, treading upon one another's heels. At one booth a Dutch auction was going on, the great attraction of the evening.

We stood on the bridge and looked down upon the bed of the river. As our host had said, the water was very low. The stream had narrowed and half the bed was dry. Here and there huge fires were burning and flaming and men danced round them, looking like demons, as the flames now and then bursting forth lighted up their grim faces. They were roasting chestnuts; and as each batch was finished it was carried up to the fair to be quickly devoured by the boys and girls who to-night were supreme. Every dog has his day and it was their turn to reign. They must make the most of it. To-morrow—or the next day—the flowers and garlands would fade. When the clock struck twelve Cinderella went back to her rags and her chimney-corner. Black Monday always comes. Every stall—and they seemed never-ending—displayed nothing but toys; toys of every description; from juvenile clasp-knives to slice off finger-ends or sever a main artery, to seductive-looking purses that were a cruel reflection upon empty pockets. To think of them as appropriated and filled, was to suggest unknown possibilities of wasted chestnuts and a hundred other things that simply meant gilding the rainbow; yet all as out of reach as the moon, or Aladdin's lamp, or perpetual holiday. The very thought was agony.

As we stood on the bridge all this glare and reflection outlined the wonderful houses that rise up straight from the river so that its waters wash their foundations—and at very high tides or floods come in at the ground floor windows: a visitor more free than welcome. The occurrence is rare but it has been known. We could just trace the marvellous outlines; their strangely picturesque, old-world look, and we waited with patience for the morning and the splendours it should reveal.

We plunged boldly into the very midst of the crowd and the fair, and were swallowed up in the vortex. It was rather bewildering. All the people seemed to do was to walk up and down in an endless stream, eating chestnuts and blowing penny trumpets. To-night, at any rate, the stalls were almost neglected. Possibly they had not had time to digest the glamour; as we have said, it was bewildering; to-morrow the harvest would come.

At the very end of the long thoroughfare lights and stalls and crowd were left behind. We reached a quaint corner which cunningly led to another bridge. This we crossed and soon found ourselves in the wide market square and a different scene. Here the shows had taken up their abode, and every effort was being made to excite a listening and apparently unresponsive crowd. The learned pig, the two-headed lady, the gentleman who drew portraits with his feet which were given

away gratis, the clairvoyants who told fortunes and promised wealth and marriage, the lion-tamer who put his head into the lion's mouth, and pulled his tail and rode astride and otherwise took rash liberties with the monarch of the forest ; lastly but not least the enchanting ballet, where ladies and gentlemen in scanty costume pirouetted on the tips of their toes, made love to each other in dumb motions and placed each other in impossible contortions : all these attractions were faithfully described and freely offered to the gaping multitude.

But again it was bewildering and they must have time to awaken from their glamour.

In vain a clown tried to be facetious, shouted himself hoarse and blew a trumpet until he was black in the face. Bells rang and drums beat and pistols were let off inside and faint cheers were got up—the crowd would not respond. Every now and then a young man would mount the steps with his innamorata, and sheepishly disappear behind the curtain that led to the enchanted land ; hope would revive and the clown redouble his persuasions ; only to go through another five minutes' interval, whilst the harvest-time was surely passing.

We left them to it, unallured by the unseen treasures. We had had our day of shows and illusions. This was not what we had expected of Gerona the beautiful and the ancient. If we felt that we had a slight grievance against her, who could wonder ?

Presently we found ourselves in the darkness of the night at the edge of the river. There was more water here ; no dry bed was visible. Away to the left, as far as we could gather, stretched the open country. Tall trees, black and sombre and mysterious, waved and rustled behind us. It was evidently one of the public parks or promenades that exist just outside so many of the Spanish towns ; a pleasant refuge from the midday sun and sultry evening glare.

The water in front of us looked cold and calm and tranquil. Rushes grew by the waterside ; we heard the wind rustling and whispering through them ; Pan playing upon his pipes. Lights twinkled from the windows of many a house down by the riverside. A lurid glare still hung in the sky, and beneath it, in front of us to the right, we traced the wondrous outlines of the town. Above all, crowning the heights, stretching heavenwards like mighty monsters, uprose the towers of the cathedral and other churches. It was an almost unearthly scene, in its dark gloom and grandeur of mystery. Far down, on the dry bed of the river, we could see the chestnut-roasters dancing like demons about their holocausts. Evidently no clown was needed to cry the virtues of their wares ; the demand was equal to the supply and apparently both were unlimited.

We hardly knew how we had found our way here, or how we found it back again. Instinct guides one on these occasions and as a rule does not fail as it failed us in the midnight streets of Toledo. But a conjuror would not find his way in those narrow wynds, which all resemble each other and have no plan or sequence. Even the

jealousy of an Eleanor would have been at fault—and poor Rosamond spared the poisoned bowl.

To-night it was comparatively plain-sailing. Afar off, we heard the ceaseless voice and trumpet of the clown bidding people to his feast of good things. Like the shrill warning of a syren in stormy weather, it told us which way to steer, what to avoid. We passed well on the outskirts of the still gaping crowd and again found ourselves on the bridge: the dark bridge, with the river flowing beneath, and the houses rising in a great impenetrable mass, and the distant chestnut-roasters at their demon work.

The evening was growing apace; a neighbouring church clock struck ten. This served to change the current of one's thoughts, which hitherto had simply drifted aimlessly with the scene before us.

"Let us go to the cathedral," said H. C. "We shall then get two distinct impressions instead of one. I always like to see an important building first at night—the next morning's view is so different—such a revelation."

This was quite true; it was our own invariable experience; but how find our way to the cathedral, and how find it back to the hotel? We had no desire to repeat our Toledo adventure. The story of the Babes in the Wood is only pretty to those who look on.

"This is evidently a very different town from Toledo," replied H. C. "We have only to climb the height to get to the cathedral. We will play at a sort of Hare and Hounds. I will drop pieces of paper by way of scent. Or I might be a little Hop o' my Thumb, and scatter stones on the road."

"A silken thread would be more poetical," we suggested.

"True," he admitted; "but," with a profound sigh which quite startled us, "there is no Fair Rosamond at the end to receive us. Here we can only worship the antique. Rosamond was not antique."

"But this has one great virtue," we returned; "it can never disappoint you or play you false. And, oh rare merit, its charms increase with age."

Again H. C. sighed deeply. He had had many disappointments; but then he had deserved them. Butterflies flit from flower to flower, to one love constant never; until by-and-by they alight on a nettle, and it stings them. The little allegory was lost upon H. C. People never know themselves: the "gifte" is still withheld from mortals.

We left the bridge, and found ourselves once more in the quaint corner which was very much like an unequal octagon. Just in front of us was a narrow turning; a long flight of steps apparently without end; a veritable Jacob's Ladder.

"Surely it leads to Paradise," said H. C. "Let us take it."

"Would you be admitted?" we asked, "with all those broken vows upon your conscience?"

The Oracle was silent. We took a bold plunge and commenced



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the ascent. It was a steep and rugged climb ; we could see nothing, for dead walls were about us. There were twistings and turnings and crooked ways, and rough, uneven steps ; a veritable pilgrimage.

"Patience," said H. C. "Everything comes to him who climbs. I like to vary our proverbs sometimes ; the old forms grow so hackneyed."

As he spoke, we came upon a hidden turning to the left, short and straight and evidently full of purpose. We took it without doubting, and soon found ourselves in the open square, bound on one side by the cathedral, with the Bishop's palace at right angles.

On this occasion no majestic outlines rewarded us. Not for its exterior, but for its interior is the Cathedral of Gerona famous. All doors were locked and barred. We knocked for admission ; a knock of protest. These wonderful buildings should be open at night as well as day. Some of their finest effects are lost by this tyranny. But we knocked in vain ; only ghostly echoes answered us. Ghosts pass through doors ; we never heard that the most accommodating ghost ever opened them to admit mortals. It was the great south doorway, at which we appealed—the Apostle's Doorway—and we could just trace in the darkness its fine, deeply-recessed arch. Above the cathedral rose its one solitary pagan tower, shadowy and unreal against the night sky.

Facing the west front was a broad, magnificent, apparently endless flight of steps, such as few cathedrals can boast of. To-night we could see nothing beyond of the town and the river, and the great stretch of country, and the far-off Pyrenees which we knew must be there. All this must wait for the morning. Nor should we have to wait so very long, for the night and the moments were flying. The glare had died out of the sky ; shows and booths had evidently put out their lights, the crowd had gone home their several ways. Now Gerona might truly be likened to a dead city.

Not a sound disturbed the stillness, excepting the cry of the watchmen in different parts of the town. One proclaimed the time and the weather, and another took up the tale ; and sometimes a duet rose upon the air, the result discord. We heard it all distinctly from our citadel above the world.

As we looked one of them passed in slow contemplation at the foot of the long flight of steps—steps nearly as broad as the cathedral itself. His staff struck the ground, and his light flashed about, awakening shadows upon the houses. The effect was weird. His heavy footsteps echoed right and left through the narrow streets, a fitting accompaniment to his monotonous chant. We had long grown quite familiar with these old watchmen, who came laden with an atmosphere of the past. They are so in harmony with these towns of ancient outlines ; so suggestive of lawless days, when perhaps the faintest glimmer of an oil lamp only made darkness more hideous ; days when their office was no sinecure, as now, but one of real danger and responsibility.

The cathedral clock struck eleven. We waited until the last faint vibration had died upon the air, then turned to go. It seemed a great many hours since we had risen in the darkness of the Narbonne misty morning, and H. C. had been reawakened with a sort of domestic volcanic eruption; and Madame had wished us Bon Voyage over our tea and hot roll, and had disappeared in the mist like a flash to put the final touches to her *diner de noce*.

"Now for Hare and Hounds," we said to H. C. "You lead the way, and we will follow."

"By the beard of Ali Krokah!" he cried, one of his favourite strong expressions, "I forgot all about it, and have put none down."

"So that the scent has failed, and we are undone?"

Remorse made him silent for a moment. Then he turned the tables and tried to lay the blame upon us.

"It was your fault after all," he said. "Your saying what you did about the silken thread and Fair Rosamond, set me thinking what a delightfully romantic adventure it would be if it could only come true. Naturally everything else went out of my mind."

"We must now make the best of it," was all we answered, "and get back to the hotel as we can. Let us vary the route. These steps look inviting; we will take them. All roads lead to Rome."

We went boldly down the interminable flight, and when at last at the bottom, turned and looked back. There was a vision of a church up in the clouds, and a pagan tower that went out of sight. We had come down to earth, and not far off the old watchman was still awaking shadows and echoes in the narrow street. We could not do better than follow, and presently, we knew not how, found ourselves in our quaint little octagonal corner. All was well.

We turned up the long thoroughfare so crowded lately, now so deserted. The stalls were shut down, and the lights were out. It was like a deserted banqueting-hall. The chestnut-sellers had left their pans and baskets—but had left them empty. From the bed of the river the demons had departed, but the smoke of their incense still ascended in fantastic forms from dying embers. Next we came to the old arcades, darker, more deserted, more mysterious than ever. These we knew faced our street, and turning our backs upon them, found ourselves in a few moments at the hotel.

Only a couple of old watchmen broke the solitude, meeting at their boundaries. They stood on the pavement in close converse, as though hatching mischief; then threw their light upon us and no doubt returned the compliment. We disappeared within the great doorway and left them to their own reflections—both mental and otherwise.

Then we passed up the broad staircase, the white marble glistening in the rays of the one electric lamp that still lighted up the courtyard. We thought of the sumptuous crowd that had passed up and down it in the centuries gone by; fair dames in rustling silks and gay

cavaliers in clanking swords: all the grandeur and gorgeousness of that once ducal palace. The staircase seemed haunted with ghosts and shadows, the murmur of voices, the echo of laughter.

And now appeared, dim and vapoury, a brilliant pair in tender proximity to each other. His arm encircled her waist, her fair white hand rested with fond appropriation upon his doublet. The love-look in her eyes was only equalled by the fervour and constancy in his. Yet sadness predominated, for it was a farewell interview. She was the last ducal daughter of the house; the last of her race. They were betrothed, and with them the course of true love had run smooth. But now he was bidden fight for his country, and at daybreak on the morrow would depart.

He never lived to return, but died on the battle-field. Within his gloved hand was found a golden tress tightly clasped, and next his heart a small miniature of his beautiful betrothed. Both were buried with him. She soon faded and declined and found him again in a Land where wars and partings are unknown. With her the house and the name became extinct. As we thought of this suddenly the staircase seemed full of sighs; the light grew dim.

We passed on and found the hotel empty and deserted. Every one had gone to bed, and left the long gloomy corridors to silence and the ghosts. We lighted candles, and H. C. led the way through the labyrinth to our rooms. Our own window was open, and the two old watchmen below were just where we had left them, apparently still gazing at the opening through which we had disappeared. "Il Sereno!" we said to them. "Call your hours and guard the city. Enemies lurk in secret corners."

They looked up and wished us good-night. We were not marauders after all. So they separated with an easy conscience, and from opposite ends of the street we heard them announcing the time and the weather.

It was hardly necessary, for another more untiring watchman rang out with iron tongue. Midnight slowly tolled over the town from all the churches. We could not believe an hour had passed since we had stood at the top of that vast flight of steps overlooking the darkness. How had we sauntered back? Where had the moments flown? One grows absorbed in these night visions, these dark shadows and outlines, and time passes unconsciously. We counted the strokes and listened to the vibrations, and then H. C. went off to his own regions. The watchmen were all very well in their way, but for his part, an open window and a love-serenade—such as we had been favoured with in Toledo—had greater charms. To-night certainly passionate appeals and the melody of the lute were sought in vain. Every window was closed and dark. It was time that we too said good-night to the sleeping world.

The next morning rose, we cannot say with promise. Heavy rain had fallen during the night, and lowering clouds seemed to promise more. Just now, however, they had proclaimed a truce.

We went out into the town, and felt that however much we should have preferred sunshine, yet in the grey sky was a certain harmonious blending with the grey tones of the town. Nevertheless, Spain is essentially a land for sunshine. It is needed to bring out



DOORWAY OF SAN PEDRO.

all its colouring and brilliancy almost more than any other country we know. Without sunshine its effects for the most part fall flat and dead. It is like a splendid composition played with the harmonies left out: the finest effects are wanting.

"The rainy season has begun," said H. C. "We are in for a spell of wet weather. Generally it comes in September. This year it has obligingly put it off until November. That is just my usual ill-luck."

"I fear it is so," said our host's son, who as we have said had volunteered to pilot us about the town and show forth its hidden wonders—delighted to air his French and give us lessons in Spanish. "We have a weather-wise prophet who has never been known to go wrong; a great meteorologist. He has just written to the papers to say we are about to have a month's deluge."

This was a cheerful beginning. As it proved they were all mistaken, but at the moment the skies seemed to confirm their forebodings. All the same we would not lose sight of hope—which has brought many a sinking ship into harbour that would otherwise have gone down. So we put on a cheerful countenance and bid them take heart of grace—and their umbrellas.

Space has grown too limited to enter upon the wonders of the town, which met us at every step and turning. These must be left for another paper; and, like good wine, they will bear keeping. But we must have one experience before concluding.

Let us close our eyes, and take flight upwards and alight at the head of that vast stone staircase with our backs to the cathedral.

We see this morning what last night was veiled in the darkness. The town lies chiefly to our left. We overlook a sea of red and grey roofs. To our right are the old walls with their gateways, round towers and irregular outlines. Near to us is a church-tower, graceful, octagonal, excellent in design; but the upper part of its spire is gone, and we can only imagine its once perfect beauty.

Low down beyond the town, lies the river, winding away through a picturesque country. We can even see the reeds and the rushes that border its banks, but cannot hear their murmur as we did last night. If Pan is still piping it is for the benefit of the Spanish pixies.

In the distance, the Pyrenees are sleeping in graceful, long-drawn undulations. Nothing can be lovelier than their outlines. Some of them are snow-capped and stand out pure and white against the grey skies. It is a magic picture, but we long to see it under sunshine. No wonder if Pan is silent.

We turn to the cathedral. No need to knock this morning. The great west doors yield and we enter.

The first thing that strikes us is an intense obscurity; a dim religious light deeper than we remember to have seen in any other sacred building. But to-day the grey skies have something to answer for. As the sight grows accustomed to the gloom, the next thing to strike us is the vastness and splendour of the nave in which we are standing: a single span 73 feet broad. No other church in Christendom, as far as we know, can boast of such a nave. The light comes in from windows high up, filled in with rich stained glass.

The tone of the walls and pillars is perfect, never having been touched with brush or knife ; a rich subdued claret colour, delighting the eye and the senses. Those great men of the Middle Ages made no mistakes. Nothing was admitted that disturbed their sense of harmony and proportion. They knew and recognised one thing only—the charm of perfection. Where they have failed it was that their efforts were crippled ; they were told to make bricks without straw.

Without waiting at this moment to examine the church more closely, we pass through a great doorway on the left and find ourselves in the cloisters.

Here, too, is a marvellous vision. Few cloisters in the world compare with them. The four sides are unequal, but this almost seems to heighten their attraction. They have been so little interfered with that one sees them almost in their original state. The simple round arches rest on coupled pillars of marble, slender and graceful. The capitals are extremely rich and elaborate and delicate in their carving. Here Romanesque art seems to have been introduced into Spain, coming to it through France. The cathedrals of Catalonia are most of them of amazing beauty, and seem to have laid the foundation of Mediæval Spanish art ; and this, though they would deny it, is due to French influence—happily, at that time, at its best and purest.

In this wonderful cloister we found ourselves lost in dreams of the middle ages which have glorified the earth, and seem almost as necessary to us as light and air. In the centre was an ancient well without which no cloister appears perfect. Shrubs and trees embowered it, and the fresh green stood out in contrast with the creamy walls and their Romanesque arches.

At the end of the north passage we passed through an open doorway. The view was extensive and magnificent. A steep rugged descent led to the town. Below us was the ancient Benedictine church of San Pedro, with its Romanesque doorway, and its cloisters scarcely less wonderful than those we have just visited. Near it was a smaller, equally ancient church, now desecrated and turned into a carpenter's shop. We will pay it a visit by-and-by, and make the acquaintance of its amiable and sturdy owner, who thus passes his days and does his work, as it were, under the very shadow of sanctity. Beyond all, outside the walls, on the brow of the hill, we trace the ruins of the great castle and citadel that so nobly stood the siege of Gerona until the twin spectres Famine and Disease stalked in hand in hand and overcame the brave and resolute defenders.

We gazed long upon all these historical landmarks pointed out and explained by our guide-companion. Then turning back through the cloisters we again found ourselves lost in visions of the past as we once more fell under the magic influence of the vast space and dim religious light of Gerona's splendid cathedral.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

By H. F. LESTER.



“ **M**EET me at Chorleywood station on Tuesday next at six punctually. We will fly together, then or never.

“ Yours, F. M.”

This, written on a half-sheet of pink, scented paper, in a running feminine-looking hand, was clearly enough to disturb any sister.

It came positively as a domestic thunderbolt upon Miss Thudicum's wits, when she picked it up by chance on the floor of her brother's dressing-room.

She had to read the words slowly, aloud, over and over to herself before the awful idea became fixed in her brain, that Samuel—that was her brother's name—was about to elope.

“ After keeping house for him, too, for fifteen years! The deceitfulness of men,” she confided to the furniture. She would not even admit that Mr. Thudicum, being a bachelor, had a right to marry clandestinely if he so chose.

“ *He* to become a castaway!” (She might more appropriately have said a “fly-away.”) “ At *his* age! And *who* is F. M.?” She ran her mental eye over the ladies that she and her brother both knew. No, there was nobody answering to those initials.

Now perhaps the correct course to have adopted would have been to have gone straight to the delinquent, put the letter before him, and said, “ I have found this. What does it mean?”

But such a plan had no pleasant finesse about it. Besides, Mr. Thudicum was out; he was in the City. So when his sister—a clever enough woman in her way, with literary ideals and tastes—had recovered from the first effects of the shock, she set about devising a plan of campaign that should be all the more deadly because she was determined that her brother should have no inkling of her suspicions. She would watch him. She would form ambushes. She would make certain of the position before she acted.

Resolved as she was not to show her hand, Miss Thudicum yet had a good deal of ordinary, indignant, scandalised human nature about her, so that her efforts to conceal from her brother

the disturbance of soul from which she was suffering were not entirely successful.

"My dear Lavinia!" said he on the next morning, before setting off for business. "I am afraid you want a change of air."

"Wanting to get me out of the way, hypocrite!" thought she.

"Yes," went on Samuel as his sister was silent. "I noticed that your manner last evening and again this morning was strange. That influenza you had is evidently not shaken off yet."

"Had you not better think of your own state, Samuel?"

"My own state? Oh, I am quite *sure* now that this is one of the —um—sequelae of influenza. It is a most depressing disease."

"Depressing! There are other things depress one besides influenza."

"Other things? But you haven't had those other complaints, and you have had influenza. You were lucky not to get bronchitis after it, so you've got nerves instead. You should really have a change."

"I am likely to have a long one, soon."

"By-the-bye," he remarked, ignoring the tone of her last observation, "I have rather important business at the office, and I really fear I shall not be back—um—till the late afternoon."

"Why, this is Saturday! On Saturdays you always come home to luncheon."

"Not always, Lavinia."

"I have never known you miss."

Mr. Thudicum felt that his sister was right.

"Um—I ought perhaps to tell you," he began, "that I am engaged—"

Engaged! It was coming.

"In an operation of some importance. There's a certain element of risk about it, no doubt. But"—hastily—"it's quite safe—oh, yes, quite safe!"

"Safe, and yet risky? I'm afraid I don't quite understand you, Samuel."

"Well, it's not exactly a gilt-edged security, I mean," said Samuel, feeling cornered.

"A gilt-edged security!" thought Miss Thudicum. "What a way to talk of a wife with money! He must be alluding to the dowry."

"I would gladly explain all about it, but at present I'm—I'm pledged to secrecy. There's another person—um!—a friend of mine—involved in it, you see."

"There generally is, Samuel."

And Samuel went off. Lavinia's manner was very unaccountable, he thought. It disturbed him; but something else that occurred on the way to the station disturbed him a great deal more.

He happened to look in at Duncan's shop. Duncan was the invaluable suburban librarian and stationer.

"Ha, Mr. Thudicum! you're just the gentleman I was wanting

to see. I should like to consult you over a matter. Step in here, sir."

Leading the way into his private business sanctum, Mr. Duncan closed the door, and said in a mysterious whisper:

"You are an old customer, and will pardon the liberty I take; but I feel bound to let you know what is going on."

This was a strange beginning, and Mr. Thudicum waited to hear more.

"You know," proceeded the bookseller, "that I take in letters for parties at this address?"

"Oh, yes, I knew that!"

"Highly-respectable people, too, often like having their letters sent to them under the rose, so to speak, and no harm in it, either. But it's rather queer when ladies take to that sort of thing." And he paused with a suggestive look into his customer's eyes.

"Ladies?"

"Yes!"—in a stage whisper. "What would you say, sir, if I were to tell you that your sister is having letters sent here addressed to 'L. Thudicum, Esquire'?"

"I shouldn't believe you."

"I thought you'd say so. Then look at this." And he produced a post-card.

"Being a post-card, I took the liberty of reading what was on it. If it weren't for what *is* written there, I don't think I should have troubled you; it's like a breach of the lady's confidence. But, still, you are her brother, and I thought it a duty to let you know. I hope you'll see it in the same light, sir, and I hope you won't mention to the lady that I told you."

"What's on the card?" asked Mr. Thudicum, feeling that Duncan was probably a meddlesome booby who would have to be snubbed.

He read aloud slowly these portentous words—

"If convenient, please meet me at the Gaiety Theatre at eight o'clock on Tuesday evening—stage-door."

"There's no name—not even an initial, you see," said the fussy bookseller.

Mr. Thudicum, of course, affected to take the matter very lightly.

"There's some simple explanation," he said. "My sister can take good care of herself. She's a clever woman, and has had influenza, and—and—well, I will speak to her on the subject. Many thanks!"

He thought about the problem all the morning. His head was still full of it when he returned home in the afternoon. The idea of the usually staid Lavinia having secret correspondence addressed to her, adopting an *alias*, and meeting nameless strangers at theatre-doors, seemed to him like a bad kind of nightmare. The one redeeming point was that her correspondent wrote on a post-card.

That *looked*, at all events, as if neither of them was at all ashamed of publicity.

At dinner something led to the subject of the "new woman," and Mr. Thudicum was tempted to remark that the only thing he admired about her was her openness.

Miss Thudicum tartly replied that "Some people seemed to imagine that secrecy was a monopoly of the male sex!"

Mr. Thudicum thought the "old woman"—he meant the former kind of woman—who did not want a latch-key, and who would never venture to a place of amusement without a chaperon, was a greatly superior article.

"I hope when *you* select a wife," she retorted, "you will have the sense to allow her reasonable liberty—the sort of liberty you take *yourself*!"

"She sha'n't go to theatres by herself!" blurted out Mr. Thudicum.

"Theatres are admirable institutions—acting is a divine art!" replied his sister.

"He's an actor," said the brother to himself. He replied aloud: "Quite so—quite so; but, still, taken in moderation and with proper companionship."

"Clearly 'F. M.' is not an actress. That's one comfort," thought Lavinia.

Domestic matters progressed with ominous smoothness until the fatal Tuesday was reached. On that morning Mr. Thudicum was evidently in a state of high nervous tension. He should have liked to take his sister into his confidence, but he felt that he could not in honour do so. Perhaps it was this that gave him, prosperous, respected citizen as he was, a distinctly hang-dog look, which his sister was not slow to notice.

"Conscious guilt," she said to herself severely. Then she began to wonder whether at the eleventh hour Samuel would repent of his projected clandestine marriage to "F. M."

Just before his usual time for starting Cityward, Lavinia felt that she *must* say something—something to keep him from going over the precipice. The worst of it was that she was not sure whether the supposed precipice were not a mere sand-hill.

"Will you be back early, Samuel?"

"Um! By-the-bye, Lavinia, I ought to tell you I shall be dining in the City to-night."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and I've been asked to go down to Chorleywood this afternoon"—Lavinia gasped: was the revelation coming?—"and play a game of golf. There are links at Chorleywood, you know."

"*You* play golf, Samuel? You don't know how to!"

"One gets into the way of it very soon, they say."

"Far too soon!"—impressively. "What is play to you, Samuel, may be death to me!"

Mr. Thudicum looked quite scared.

"I wish you would not be so gloomy about things," he said.

"Are you determined to bring ruin on yourself, Samuel?"

"Ruin, Lavinia! Oh, that horrid influenza! Do you take your tonic regularly?"

His sister boiled over.

"Samuel! Pretence is useless. *I know why you are going to Chorleywood. I know whom you are to meet there!*"

Her brother looked dumbfounded.

"How did you find it out?"

"I picked up a letter that you dropped."

"Pardon me, Lavinia! Perhaps I ought not to run the risk."

"Oh, Samuel, I am glad you see it now. Then you *will* give her up?"

"Give her—oh, you mean give *it* up. Not a bit. I am pledged in honour to it."

"But are you not pledged, too, to your own sister?"

"Not in the same way. In a minor degree, you know. I assure you there's no harm in it."

"No harm in it! In a minor degree! Samuel, base as I know the majority of men to be, I never expected to hear such atrocious sentiments from my own brother."

Samuel was roused.

"Well, if it comes to that, Lavinia"—Mr. Thudicum was about to embark on a disquisition about ladies and strangers and meetings at theatres; but he would put it more indirectly. "Let us change the subject! I shall be passing Duncan's shop on my way—*Duncan's* shop—have you any—any orders to give—um?"

Lavinia retreated within her defences at once.

"Duncan's?" she said suspiciously.

"Yes. A useful man, that."

"Very. But that is not the point. Samuel," tragically, "*will* you return this evening?"

To his sister's intense surprise, Samuel said:

"I hope to be back at nine, if all goes well."

And Mr. Thudicum, who hated scenes, said "Good-bye," and walked out quickly.

"He expects to be back at nine!" Lavinia could only murmur to herself. She subsided on to a sofa.

In a few moments she had formed a resolution. When Samuel arrived at Chorleywood to carry out his mysterious but insane purpose, she would be there.

Accordingly, about five that afternoon she set out. Fate was rather unkind to her, for her train into town was unaccountably stopped and delayed, so that at Baker Street she missed the connection on which she had counted, and had to wait an hour. She had intended being at the trysting-spot at a quarter to six: as a

matter of fact, she could not arrive till a quarter to seven, and the meeting was arranged for six. Suppose she found the birds flown! She paced up and down the platform in impotent fury.

There is a lovely upland common at Chorleywood sacred to golfers. It comes sloping down towards the railway line on one side, and continues on into a hollow on the other. And usually the red-coated golfer may be seen from a distance indulging in his afternoon tee.

What Miss Thudicum beheld on this occasion was very different. Rickmansworth was left behind; the train was slowing down to enter Chorleywood station, and Lavinia, standing up at the window in excitement, witnessed a strange sight.

Along the grassy brow of the hill she noticed something like a couple of sails moving rapidly, with what looked like a huge washing-basket, slung on little wheels, beneath the sails. Was this a new development of golf? No sooner had she framed the thought than the washing-basket arrived at the edge of the hill, and actually launched out into the air, while the wings flapped as though it were a gigantic fowl striving to leave its native earth.

There followed a creaking noise, plainly audible; one wing ceased to move; the basket assumed a lopsided attitude and descended rapidly towards the ground, and when it was about a couple of yards from the grass two large dark objects fell out.

This was hardly what she had come to see. She took a hurried look all round the platforms. Her brother was nowhere visible. A dive into waiting-rooms revealed no eligible lady. She started off to the village, intending to see if the runaway couple were at the local inn: incidentally she would examine what kind of improved golf it was that was being inaugurated at Chorleywood.

She came upon the ridge. Two men, she saw, were talking in an animated way, with a small crowd of yokels around them. For the first time the idea flashed upon her that what had fallen from the basket must have been human beings. She drew near, and to her inexpressible astonishment beheld—Mr. Samuel Thudicum! Very dishevelled, rather dirty—he had fallen out into a marsh—and obviously very disconcerted at the mishap.

“I see it all!” she exclaimed, as she ran to him and fell on his neck, to his intense disgust. “Oh, Samuel, what an idiot I have been!”

“I am sure you have, Lavinia. You seem to be one still. Before these people, too. Is it not enough humiliation to have an experiment in aeronautics fail—though *I* never believed in it as much as Mildmay—without being messed over by you? What on earth brought you here?”

“Who is the lady, Thudicum?” said the other gentleman. He looked about fifty, with grizzled hair, and a face that would have been pleasant if there had not been a patch of soil on one side of it and a rapidly discolouring bruise on the other.

"This is my sister, Miss Thudicum. Let me introduce you to her—Mr. Frank Mildmay. A friend of mine, Lavinia, and an inventor."

"F. M.," said Lavinia. "Of course!"

The stranger bowed.

"You seemed to have divulged our secret, Thudicum," he said in a complaining tone.

"No, you mistake. My sister is over-anxious. Found one of your letters. And I suppose she thought she would be in at the death."

"Wish she had come earlier," growled Mr. Mildmay. "She might have helped to steady the machine. It was that starting off too early, before I had got the wings out, which made it collapse."

"Well, it *has* collapsed," said Samuel.

"And you are saved!" said Lavinia joyfully. She would not reveal her suspicions to her brother. He would only laugh at her. He had come to Chorleywood to fly with F. M., and had he not flown?

Their return journey to town—after Mr. Thudicum had recuperated in the village inn—was rather a gloomy one. Mr. Thudicum was thinking of the scene he had just gone through. Miss Thudicum was thinking of that which still awaited her, and of how she could possibly manage to get away from her brother to keep her appointment at the Gaiety. She decided to get lost.

Baker Street is a station with numerous platforms and staircases, and it lent itself quite readily to such a design.

"Ah, ha!" chuckled Samuel, as his sister disappeared up one staircase like a hunted hare; "I see how it is. I was forgetting about that nice little Gaiety plot. *She* came to Chorleywood to see what I was up to. I'll repay her by being at the Gaiety to watch *her* manoeuvres."

He emerged at a distant exit into the street, intending to leap into the first available cab. But no cab was to be seen. "Never mind," he thought, "I'll take a bus."

But buses are slow, and by the time that Mr. Thudicum was put down in the Strand the clocks were already pointing to half-past eight. Half an hour after Lavinia's interview, or whatever it was, should have commenced.

He had not formed any plan of operations, and he was standing on the pavement outside the theatre wondering whether Lavinia were more likely to be found in the stalls, the boxes, or the green-room, when who should step out of a door close by but Lavinia herself. Her brother gave one look—it was the stage door.

Lavinia stopped dead short when she saw him, and turned very pale.

"Are you going on the stage?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Why are you here, Samuel?" Anything to gain time to think what line to adopt.

Samuel did not reply directly. He only whispered still more impressively :

“The *stage door* !”

“Yes,” said his sister. “Well, I have gained a lesson this afternoon that one ought not to keep things secret from one’s relatives, so I’ll just tell you all about it. I have written a play.”

“Written a play—you !”

“You are not complimentary to my powers,” she spoke in an injured tone. “Not only have I written it, but the lessee seems *very* pleased with it. I think he’ll produce it. It’s a high-class comedy in four acts. Its being so *very* high-class he did say might be a little against it, but he has known plays by new writers go with a roar.”

“Go with a roar.” Mr. Thudicum felt too stupefied to do more than blankly repeat his sister’s words.

“Come, congratulate me, Samuel,” she said smiling, but the smile faded away and gave place to a frown; for why was Samuel here at all? Could he have been spying—meanly following her?

“Perhaps you will explain *your* presence in this neighbourhood,” she said frigidly.

“Oh, well”—he was just going to disclose about Mr. Duncan, but that would never do. “You see, I lost you at Baker Street.”

“I know you did.”

“Then I wondered—I mean I could not decide *where* you had gone—and so I was going down to—to—”

“Ah”—in a relieved tone—“I understand. To give information at Scotland Yard to the police ?”

“Um—exactly.”

“But I didn’t know that by the Gaiety was the shortest route to Scotland Yard from Baker Street.”

“Oh, yes. Gaiety leads to Scotland Yard, often. I may have come a little out of my way. You see, I felt so uneasy about you. It was a happy inspiration—because we *have* met.”

And Lavinia never discovered the treachery of which Mr. Duncan had been guilty.

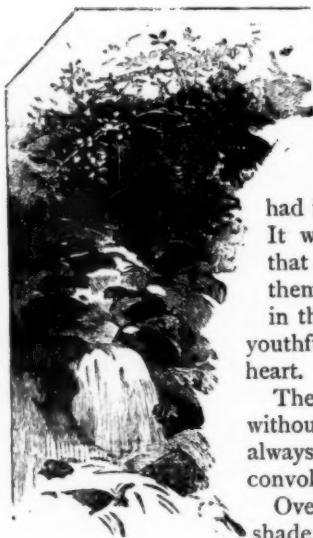


PILGRIMS OF THE NIGHT.

BY SARAH DOUDNEY.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN THE DESIRE COMETH.



THE Angel's Meadow was the name which Bennet had bestowed upon a quiet field at the base of Chalkham Hill. He had borrowed the name from Heidelberg, where he had spent two years of student life ; and in the early flush of his passion for Dulcie he had idealised the scene of their first meeting. It was here that she had been walking on that Sunday evening which had brought them together. And as he paced to and fro in the stillness of the place, he recalled that youthful love-madness with much weariness of heart.

The meadow was just a calm green level without any especial beauty ; but the grass was always fresh and sweet, and now the large white convolvulus hung its wreath upon the hedges.

Over the hill hovered the first transparent shade of twilight, faintly touched with melancholy sunshine ; and Bennet thought it was like the earliest sign of approaching death on a well-loved face. "The night cometh," sighed the low whisper of the wind. Yes ; it must always come ; every feeling, every passion has its night ; its coolness and darkness after the heat of a fiery day.

Only a few minutes went by before he saw Dulcie coming towards him. He looked at her critically as he advanced to meet her, and mentally compared her with another girl whose face and form were seldom absent from his thoughts nowadays.

But Dulcie was worth looking at. He candidly admitted the truth to himself. She was very handsome, with large, limpid brown eyes—the transparent brown of a wood stream, touched with gleams of sunshine. These eyes of hers had always had a strong attraction for Bennet ever since the day when he had first looked

into their liquid depths ; they were singularly clear, and as candid as a child's. Artistically speaking, her nose was perhaps a failure ; but beneath it were rich red lips, full, but well-shaped, and cheeks warm with the tint of the peach. Her figure, moulded on rather a large scale, was beautiful in its youthful strength and symmetry, and her plain dark gown became her well. Her hat was plain, too, relieved only by a knot of golden ribbon ; her linen collar and cuffs were as white as snow, and she wore a little bunch of honeysuckle at her breast. Never had she looked handsomer and freer from the least taint of vulgarity ; yet Bennet's greeting was cold—as cold as the heart in which the fire of passion was dead. "Have you been ill, Bennet ?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," he said in a weary voice.

"But you will be better soon, dear. No one suspects you. It was a nine days' wonder, and it's half-forgotten already. I know it was very terrible and sad ; but it'll be buried in your own breast."

He watched her slowly and calmly while she was speaking. When she ceased he looked away across the meadow, and she saw the black marks under his eyes which told of sleepless nights and perpetual pain.

For a minute she stood irresolute, longing to pour out all the love that was pressing so heavily on her heart—longing to tell him that his coldness had left her unchanged. But, with a strong effort, she kept back the impulse, and waited to hear what he would say next. He had not yet told her why he had asked her to meet him.

"I wished you to come here," he said at last, "because—" He came to a full stop, and shivered as if a cold wind had passed over him. Yet the evening was warm and very still.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "Oh, Bennet, don't you know—"

"I want to know," he said, bringing out the words with a great effort, "whether you will keep my secret ?"

It was her turn to shiver and shrink. Something seemed to rise in her throat and almost choke her when she tried to speak.

"Oh," she said, "you might have known !"

The expression of her face stirred him deeply. The brown eyes were very beautiful with that look of pathetic reproach in them.

"Dulcie, forgive me," he said, almost tenderly. "You feel that the question is not needed. You think I ought to trust implicitly to your nobleness and goodness."

"I don't know that I am good and noble, Bennet ; but I do feel that I love you far too well ever to do you the least bit of harm ; and I wonder you don't feel it too."

He looked at her steadfastly and sighed. Joscelyne's words were ringing in his ears at this moment. Alas, it was the very fact of this intense, unconquerable love which made poor Dulcie so dangerous.

"I do feel it," he said. "But, my dear girl, we do not know ourselves. Until the other day," he added, in a shaken voice, "I

little guessed what a demon of fury was lying coiled up inside me. You feel now, Dulcie, that it would be simply impossible to betray me; but supposing I were to do something which exasperated you beyond endurance? Supposing I did the very thing which would wound you far more deeply than you have ever been wounded yet?"

He had humanity enough in him to feel that these words, spoken to the woman who loved him better than any one else in the world, almost choked him in the utterance.

Dulcie's eyes dilated suddenly; the golden light, which could at times illumine them, giving them a meaning such as they had certainly never expressed to him before. Her face was awfully white —even the ripe lips had turned pale.

"Go on," she said, almost in a whisper. "You must speak out plainer now."

He shifted away from the gaze of those large, brilliant eyes which were staring miserably at him from the white face.

"Why do you say that?" he asked uneasily. "I was only supposing and suggesting. Why do you get so excited in a moment?"

"If I am excited, Bennet, it's because I see that you are hiding something from me. The other day, when you spoke of giving me up, a fear came into my head. But after poor Eversfield's death I forgot it altogether. Now it comes back, Bennet, it comes back!"

"Yes," he said, "it comes back. I thought it would."

She pressed one hand hard upon her bosom as if to crush down an outburst of anguish; for an instant or two the pain was suffocating.

"It was in your mind, then?" she said huskily.

He gave his shoulders an almost imperceptible shrug; then looked down at a dandelion growing near his foot, and vaguely wondered how many rays it had.

"Bennet," she began, in a clearer voice, "it seems to me that there's something we both want to say, isn't there? Why don't we say it?"

He kept his eyes fixed steadily on the dandelion.

"I have said what I wanted to say," he answered. "I asked if I could trust you to keep my secret, and you took offence at once. Heaven knows that I didn't mean to offend you."

There was a half-repressed ring of bitterness in the words which meant a great deal.

"No, no, Bennet, you wanted to say more than that," she said sadly. "There's no good in going on any longer with half truths. Speak out, and speak quickly."

"I will speak." He looked her straight in the face. "You are a good girl, and know what a sacred thing an oath is. Will you swear that, no matter what I do in the future, you will never betray me?"

They confronted each other in silence. In that moment each was looking down into the depths of the other's heart. For Dulcie, now distinctly conscious of the awful strength of her own absorbing passion, it would have been well indeed if shining wings had swept across the

Angel's Meadow, and she had beheld a celestial guardian by her side. But there was no vision vouchsafed to her bodily eyes, and her troubled spirit was deaf to the "still, small voice." After all, if the angel of the Lord, flaming sword in hand, had come visibly, and stood between this girl and the man she so madly loved, it is doubtful whether he would have prevailed against her wild infatuation. All the strong human nature in her was crying out that it would have what it craved at any cost.

"No," she said, with lips deathly white, "I won't swear that."

There was another pause; then he drew a deep breath, and spoke with terrible calmness.

"I thought you were a better kind of woman, Dulcie—on my soul I did! I credited you with loving one truly, without selfish thoughts at all. But it is plain that you are not capable of the only true kind of love."

"What is it that you call the only true kind?" she asked sullenly, but with a piteous quiver of the mouth.

"The love which St. Paul writes about 'that seeketh not her own.' The love that would choose loneliness rather than force its companionship on the object of its devotion. The love that simply *loves*, and demands no sacrifice in return for its gift."

Dulcie had the blood of peasants in her veins; she was untrained, uncultivated. But she did see, as in a lightning flash, the glory of such a love as he described, and there arose in her a momentary, passionate wish to lift herself to its level.

"I—I'm not good enough for that sort of love," she said mournfully. And then, as her sharp sense of justice began to assert itself, she added in a stubborn tone: "I don't see why all the sacrifice is to be on my side. 'Twas you who ran after me, Bennet, and made me care for you. You seem to forget that, when you want to cast me off like an old glove."

"I don't forget it—is it ever far away from my mind that I have behaved like an idiot and a scoundrel? But, of course, Dulcie, I did not think that you would take my love-making so seriously to heart."

"What is play to you is death to me," she muttered bitterly.

"No, no; you will dismiss me from your thoughts, my dear girl. You will marry some one who will make you far happier than I could have done; you will——"

"Never," she cried, with rising passion. "And I won't take an oath to please you. I know why you'd like to make me swear never to betray you. I know why you want to be rid of me. It's because you've taken a fancy to another girl, Bennet; that's why it is. A little while ago you had the game in your own hands; but it's different now. You can't throw me away quite as lightly as you fain would. There's a bond between us."

A flush swept suddenly over Bennet's pale face, and passed away, leaving it whiter than before.

"There is no reason for such a surmise," he said coldly.

"There's plenty of reasons," she returned, with that disregard of grammar which seemed so terrible to him now. "Why, I've watched your face when you've been looking at her in church—just as you used to look at me. You turn red if you chance to meet her eyes. Where I sit, I can look right at Miss Wooledge whenever I've a mind to. Oh, Bennet, I tried to tell myself that you only looked so because she was pretty. But when you tired of me I guessed what you were going to do!"

"Then you know more than I do, Dulcie." He was still quiet and cool. "I am not in a position to make plans. My appointment as Lord Silverstone's secretary is not permanent. When he leaves Chalkham it is probable that he will not require my services any more. You know that I am a poor man with uncertain prospects."

He passed his hand across his forehead, and pushed back his hat. He looked so weary and worn that her heart yearned over him. Poor fellow! Had she not been too hard on him a minute ago?

"I wish I could be a help to you," she said, the old, soft tone returning to her voice, and the pathetic look coming back into her eyes. "Oh, Bennet, isn't it possible to fall in love with me over again? You told me, you know, that you'd never, never change; and you can hardly blame me for believing you."

"I don't blame you, Dulcie. I blame only myself."

"Am I so very horrid, Bennet?" She came closer to him, and timidly lifted her face up to his. "You used to think me nice-looking, didn't you?"

"I think so still. A great deal more than nice-looking, Dulcie."

"And you said that I had excellent brains, and that with education I shouldn't be far behind the best. I could learn if I had the chance; indeed I could."

"Yes, Dulcie; that's quite true. And I hope you will have the chance one of these days."

Her lips trembled nervously. She laid one hand upon his arm with a gentle touch.

"Bennet, do you want me to take that oath that you may be free to marry if it pleases you? Are you afraid that, if I hear you are about to marry, I shall speak out and ruin you?"

"My dear child," he answered evasively, "is it wonderful that I am anxious to ensure your silence? You can send me to penal servitude if you like. And in a moment of great irritation you may be wrought up to do it."

"If I swear to be silent, will you swear, Bennet, to marry nobody but me?"

She was looking very beautiful at that moment,—so beautiful, that he felt a strong wave of returning tenderness. After all, Leila Wooledge was but a lovely dream; there was only a faint hope that he could ever win her for a wife. He put his arms round Dulcie's

waist and held her close to him, just as he had held her in the old days when he had first gained the love of her loyal heart.

"My poor girl," he said, "why is it that you waste such a wealth of love? I'm a very poor fellow. For your own sake, Dulcie, it would be wiser to forget me."

Her arms had crept up, and were twined round his neck. All the rich carmine had come back to lip and cheek; her eyes brimmed over with golden light; but she did not speak. Then he stooped and kissed her.

In the dark days that came afterwards he strove to say to himself that he was entirely free from blame. It was Dulcie, he said, who brought her fate upon herself, and clung to him in the very hour when she ought to have set him free.

And Dulcie, looking back, admitted the truth of this accusation against her, and acknowledged her mistake with a sad heart. Only—let this be her excuse—it was an immature, undisciplined girl who had wildly striven to get the thing on which her heart was set, and had shut her ears to the voice which had whispered that to let go is better than to hold fast; to resign is nobler than to gain.

The day faded into dusk. A lonely light, lingering just over the hill, looked like a faint pathway to the sky; the scent of the earth was sweet in the meadows, but the air was growing chill. The two, who had loitered here so long, parted slowly and with difficulty; but they parted without any vows, or even promises. As Bennet walked back to Field House he remembered, in a vague way, that he had summoned Dulcie to their trysting place for a purpose which had been unaccomplished. She had not sworn anything; they had simply forgotten all about it.

Simeon Goss and his wife had taken tea long ago; but the black tea-pot was keeping hot upon the hob. Simeon, busy with his plane, did not indulge as usual in that cheerful growl which he called singing. His face was grave, and his lips were compressed as he turned off the shavings,—those beautiful satiny curls which had been little Dulcie's playthings in days gone by. How distinctly he could recall the child, dressed in her calico pinafore, trying to fasten the "yellow ringlets" on her own rough little head! People talked a good deal of nonsense about the trouble of looking after children, he thought. In his opinion they gave far more trouble when they grew up, and wouldn't be looked after any more.

Mrs. Goss was sitting darning, but her mind was full of misgivings about her daughter. Dulcie had not said that she was going for a long walk; she had nodded and smiled at her mother as she went out at the door, and had remarked that she was coming back at tea-time. But tea-time was past, and there was no Dulcie. Mrs. Goss, feeling unaccountably and unreasonably nervous, started at every step that drew near the doorway. She had not the slightest excuse for thinking that anything was amiss with her girl; Dulcie had grown

a little paler and thinner lately ; but the change in her appearance was not marked enough to cause any uneasiness. But a true mother has mysterious instincts ; and Mrs. Goss's loving heart was not at rest.

Presently, just after she had given one very great start for nothing, Dulcie came in quickly, but with a quiet tread. She paused and stood looking at her mother across the room.

"Oh, dear, dear !" said Mrs. Goss. "Why, here you are at last ?"

"Yes, mother. I had a headache, and stayed out much longer than I meant to stay. Now I'll come and see to things, dear ; you're tired."

"No, I'm not tired, only worried like. I've put the tea-pot on the hob for you, Dulcie. Do go and let your father see that you're come."

"Was—was he worrying about me ?" asked the girl with a faint tremor in her voice.

"Maybe he was a little. You used to be so reg'lar in all your ways, you know. And you've been a bit unsettled lately, haven't you ?"

"The weather," Dulcie began hurriedly. But Mrs. Goss stopped her with a shake of the head.

"No, no, my girl. The weather's got a broad back ; but there are things as can't be put upon it."

Her daughter made a sudden movement towards her, and taking her mother's head between her hands, stroked it fondly.

"Oh, I do love you, mother !" she said. "I do love you so !"

Tears came into the good woman's eyes.

"It's the best kind of love, almost," she answered. "But surely, child, you're a little strange this evening ! Just go and look in on father before you drink your tea, will you ? I've a queer kind of feeling myself ; somehow I've sat here starting and quaking at shadows. God preserve us all !"

With a swift sinking of the heart Dulcie thought that this prayer was prayed too late. It should have risen sooner, mother ; there should have been strong crying and tears before the sun went down upon the Angel's Meadow an hour or two ago, when she might nobly have resigned, but chose to keep—though the keeping in the future should bring her infinite pain.

She went her way into the kitchen, where the fire burnt brightly, and the kettle and the cat sang their drowsy songs together. The sound of the plane was heard in the carpenter's shop ; but she hesitated for a moment, standing in the fire-light with clasped hands and down-bent head before she looked in upon her father.

He raised his face quickly as she drew near. There was a look of inquiry in the eyes that met hers ; but he only said quietly :

"Home at last, my girl ?"

"Yes, father." Her voice was low, and she was trembling as she had not done a few moments ago. "'Twas silly of me to stay out in the twilight ; the meadows get damp and chill, and there's

a mist coming up from the sea. It's likely enough that I've taken cold."

"Make haste and drink some hot tea," he said kindly. "You go a-dreaming when you're in them fields, don't you, Dulcie?"

"I suppose I do, father. It's just one of my bad habits, and I'll break myself of it as soon as I can."

She returned to the kitchen, and took the black tea-pot off the hob without knowing what she was doing. Then she sat down and began mechanically to eat and drink; and the cat unfolded its paws, and fell to clawing her skirt with feline tenderness. She looked round the kitchen, taking note of the familiar objects as if she saw them now in a new light. The shining tins which her own hands had polished, reflected the dancing flames; the cups and plates and dishes, which she had washed with housewifely care, rewarded her by showing their clean faces in the cheerful blaze. She felt, all at once, an unreasoning love for all these inanimate things; never had the fine old kitchen seemed so dear and homelike before.

These senseless things—these pans and dishes—belonged to a life which could never be lived again; they were intimately associated with that fresh girlhood which was gone for ever. This was why they seemed so dear to her to-night.

She was not happy; in her innermost heart she knew that it was not happiness which made her cheeks flush and set her pulses throbbing. It was only "that unrest which men miscall delight;" that burning draught of bliss which excites, instead of quenching thirst. Yet she told herself triumphantly a thousand times that she had won her wish, and made Bennet fall in love with her over again.

"He is mine," she thought, when she went to her little room at night. "I am sure of him now. I can never lose him any more!"

Yet he had never been so utterly lost to her as he was at the moment which cemented their bond. In gaining the bodily part of him, the spiritual had escaped her. But this was a truth which she could not realise yet. In the season of gloom that was coming she would learn this old-world lesson bitterly, as many a reckless woman has learnt it before. Not yet had her spirit-education begun. She was still a materially-thinking girl, swayed and dominated by an earthly love.

Looking out of her narrow window she saw a lovely sight. Troops of light clouds floated past the moon, and were changed by her mystic glory into the "shining ones" of Bunyan's dream. On they drifted, sweeping the dark sky with silver vesture, holding out shadowy arms, bending radiant heads, while the stars watched them, and the quiet fields lay far below. The purity and solemnity of this night vision hushed her unawares. Could these indeed be angels sent to watch over "the pilgrims of the night?" How would they look upon passionate human creatures, tossed by all the wild storms of life?

She turned away from the window with a graver face, and sank on her knees beside the bed. But the old simple words did not come readily now. What was there to pray for any more? She had got the thing that she wanted most. If Heaven had anything better to give, she was too ignorant to ask for it.

And then the scene in the Angel's Meadow was acted over again in fancy. She lost herself in recalling the clasp of Bennet's arms, and the pressure of his lips. The prayer dissolved into a vision, and she rose from her knees with a long sigh.

CHAPTER IV.

HAS HE SPOKEN?

MAJOR DAUGHTON had quite got over his illness, and was sitting downstairs, in his usual chair by the fire. It was December now—a pleasant December—free from wind and rain. Through the window he could look down a long garden, dimly coloured with clusters of asters and yellow leaves, and touched by the pale light of the afternoon sun.

His daughter, wearing a close-fitting gown of dark-blue serge, was walking along the path. Now and then she paused to gather one of the wintry flowers, and the major watched her perfect figure with quiet appreciation, smiling to himself.

"She's wonderfully beautiful," he thought. "She ought to marry a millionaire, and make me comfortable for the rest of my days. Living this wretched, cramped life here, she hasn't a chance to be seen. Wooldedge fancies her, of course, but she ought to look higher than a beggarly parson. And he's a close-fisted one if I'm not mistaken. She likes him, I can see that. He sees it too, and he won't hurry himself because there are no other fellows about. A cold-blooded prig; I should like to kick him."

His eyes were eager and bright. His fingers began to beat a tattoo on the arm of the chair as he still watched Joscelyne.

"I've always been a man of expensive tastes and limited means," he went on. "There may be a good many years before me yet. I might enjoy the fag-end of life if I could get her married well."

Joscelyne began to move towards the house, carrying her flowers.

"I'd go away if I could," muttered her father, half aloud. "It would be wise to seek 'fresh fields and pastures new,' but how can I stir without money? There's Bennet—a gentlemanly fellow enough, but he has no life in him; he'll never pick up an heiress. Always mooning and twanging the guitar when he's in the house. But Joscelyne has spirit as well as beauty; it's a thousand pities that I can't show her to the world."



"THROUGH THE WINDOW HE COULD LOOK INTO THE LONG GARDEN . . .
TOUCHED BY THE PALE LIGHT OF THE AFTERNOON SUN."

All through the sixty-five years of his life Major Daughton had been chiefly interested in the problem of how to live with as little discomfort to himself as possible. Long practice had made him perfect in the art of self-devotion. He was expert in avoiding every flinty bit of the pilgrim's path; never once had he been known to step aside that some one else might walk on the turf. The burden of his song was always: "I am the first person to be considered. I must have *my* comforts. Of course, I can't do without anything."

Poor Joscelyne, accustomed to his self-idolatry from her very babyhood, saw nothing hideous in it, and yielded to all his claims with dutiful affection. She admired her father far too much to criticise him. It was chiefly from him that she had inherited her beauty; but her deep, dark eyes had come from the mother who had died two years ago.

Looking at Major Daughton as he sat by the fire, you would have said that he was a father of whom any daughter might have been proud. His grey silky hair was still plentiful, his blue eyes were still bright. Features cameo-like in their delicate chiselling, a heavy moustache half concealing the weakness of the mouth, a tall soldierly figure with beautiful hands and feet, made up a *tout ensemble* which commanded admiration. It was no wonder that every one said he was a charming old man, and young girls always felt flattered when he paid them a little attention.

Presently Joscelyne came indoors with her winter nosegay, and set it in a quaint old pitcher with two handles. Then she held it out at arm's length, and admired it at her leisure.

"It looks very well, doesn't it, papa?" she said. "I think I have the gift of arranging flowers. Asters always go best with old china or earthenware; they are not meant for delicate crystal vases. Ah, how I wish I had a greenhouse!"

"You'd like to be rich, Joscelyne?"

"Yes, I suppose I should. Not rich, perhaps, but able to afford such luxuries as green-houses and dainty dresses, and beautiful furs. Yet I am getting on very well without all these delights."

She stood looking at the flowers with one of those faint smiles which hovered about her lovely lips like a sunbeam.

"You are not getting on as well as I could wish," said her father irritably. "Your youth and beauty are wasted here. There is nobody good enough for you to marry."

"Need one think about marriage yet, papa?"

There was a delicate tint of rose on the cheek nearest to him, and he observed it with displeasure.

"You can't help thinking about it, my dear. All girls do. It is their vocation. Has Wooledge said anything yet?"

"Said anything?"

The rose-tint deepened; the slim white fingers moved nervously about the nosegay.

"Oh, you know what I mean ! Has he given you any reason to suppose that his intentions are serious ? He evidently admires you and pays you marked attention."

She made a valiant effort, and conquered her reluctance to speak. After all, her father had a right to ask her questions, she supposed ; only she felt that a mother would have asked them differently.

"I think he likes me, papa."

"Indeed ! There must be more than thinking, and more than liking, Joscelyne, if he means anything at all."

The faint colour died out of her cheeks as suddenly as it had come, leaving her dead white. She pressed her lips together tightly, and her hands trembled.

"Don't let him make a fool of you," the old man went on pitilessly. "He has been dangling after you long enough to know his own mind. Of course if he has said something definite it is your duty to tell me. But I am not at all anxious for the match, Joscelyne ; Wooledge is a cold fellow, and a poor one to boot."

"Oh, no, papa ! He may be reserved, but not cold."

"Not cold ? Then am I to assume that his attentions have been more than marked ? That he has spoken ?"

Joscelyne, tortured beyond endurance, could scarcely keep back a sob.

"He has done and said nothing that you would object to," she said brokenly. "We are friends—nothing more at present."

"I won't have any ridiculous platonic nonsense," cried the Major, working himself up. "You shan't be mere friends—do you hear ? He shall either come forward at once or I will forbid him the house. It shall be one thing or the other. This shilly-shallying nonsense has gone on far too long."

Joscelyne suddenly plucked up a little spirit. She did not like savage love-making ; it was barbarous, she said haughtily.

"Every true man has a dash of the savage in him. You are a baby, and know nothing. If you had seen more of life, you would despise that cool, calculating prig with the sandy eye-lashes."

"I will not stay here to hear him insulted," said Joscelyne, gliding out of the room in a queenly fashion.

The Major leaned back comfortably in his arm-chair, and laughed aloud in solitude. His daughter's lofty exit had amused him immensely. But when he had had his laugh out, his face clouded over.

"She really likes that conceited stick of a parson," he thought. "And the selfish wretch hasn't told her that he cares for her ! I wish I could take her away. Wooledge would be intolerable as a son-in-law ; but there's no one else—no one else in this hopeless place."

He turned towards the fire, and closed his eyes. Joscelyne's black cat purred soothingly on the hearth-rug ; and the clock ticked

cheerfully in the stillness. Out of doors the winter light was fast fading away ; a mist had gathered in the dim alleys of the garden ; a little wind was playing languidly with the yellow leaves. Upstairs, Joscelyne was staring out of her window with distressed eyes ; her hands pressed hard upon her throbbing heart. But the handsome old man slumbered—a peaceful, selfish slumber—undisturbed by any dream.

"Tea is ready, miss," said Abigail, knocking at her young lady's door, and opening it a little way.

A glance into the room showed her a motionless figure, sitting by the window, half in darkness. Now Abigail seldom took liberties ; the Daughtons were a proud family, and she would not presume upon the privilege she had earned by long and faithful service. But her heart yearned over the motherless girl who was nursing her secret grief in solitude. She could not go away and leave Joscelyne without a word of comfort.

"You must be getting cold here, dear Miss Joscelyne," she said, entering the dim room with a quiet step.

"I am not cold," answered a weary young voice. "Yes, Abby ; I am coming."

There was a half-suppressed sigh as the figure rose slowly from the window-seat. Abigail spoke again in a cheerful tone.

"It's surprising how old rhymes come back to us from ever so far off," she said. "My grandmother used to sing an old song about the ending of the year. It told of an old year that ended in gloom, and was a sure forerunner of good luck. It's a bad omen, she would say, 'if folks are too gay, when the year dies away.'

"I never heard that saying," said Joscelyne, rousing a little.

She was fond of the old servant, and had a vague kind of faith in her sagacity. When the heart is sore, any hand may bring a leaf of balm ; and often it is the humblest hand which holds the best remedy.

"My grandmother had some odd notions," Abigail went on. "She always liked to have the houseleek growing on her roof. Now I've never seen a finer tuft of houseleek than you have got just over your window."

"What good will it do me, Abby ?"

"It protects the house from being struck by lightning, and keeps off all kinds of calamities. Oh, it's a fine thing for a young lady to go to sleep with that plant growing over her head !"

"I did not know it was there," said Joscelyne. "Perhaps I shall sleep sounder now. I have been wakeful lately, Abby."

"We all have our restless moods, Miss Joscelyne ; and when we stand between the two years—the year that's passing, and the year that's coming—we are filled with thoughts and fancies, and maybe fears."

"I am half afraid to meet the New Year, Abby. It hides so much. I think it takes a great deal of courage to begin anything."

"It takes just as much courage to end anything," Abigail said. "And we can never begin till we have ended. Life is full of all these beginnings and endings, and we must make the best of them."

"Christmas is close upon us now," said Joscelyne as they went downstairs together. "Some one is coming," she added nervously. "Hark!"

Footsteps were heard upon the flagged path leading to the house: and then there was a double knock. Her heart throbbed fast. She halted on the stairs, and tried to recover her composure in the darkness. Abigail opened the door.

"Is Miss Daughton in?" asked a well-known voice.

Alban Wooldedge was shown into a little room opposite to the sitting-room; a mere nook, just large enough to contain a piano and a morsel of fire. There was a red glow in the grate, and Abigail lighted the candles on the mantel-piece. He was standing on the hearth-rug, straight and tall, when Joscelyne entered.

"I have only a minute," he said, coming forward, and taking her hand in both of his. "Are you well?" he went on tenderly.

"Quite well," she answered. Her blood flowed in a strong, glad current again. All her fears had vanished. He was here, looking fondly into her eyes.

"Leila has decreed that we are to have a party," he said, still keeping the little hand in his warm clasp. "She says that it must come off before she goes away."

"Has she decided to go on Christmas Eve?" Joscelyne asked.

"Yes. She tells me that she has found the vicarage awfully dull. You would not find a parson's house as dreary as she does?"

He spoke in a gentle, questioning tone, pressing her hand to emphasize his words.

"No," she admitted softly.

There was silence for a moment. Would he say something more? Joscelyne felt anxious, fascinated, and frightened, all at once. But these conflicting emotions only tinged her cheeks with pink; there was no tremor, no sigh to tell of disquietude.

If any important words were trembling on his lips, he must have kept them back by a strong effort of will.

"Five o'clock on Thursday," he said quietly. "Don't forget. You will meet all our parish workers, and Leila expects a great deal from you. I think you are to pour out tea, or perform some heavy duty of that kind."

She shook her beautiful head. "No; Mrs. Cartwright must pour out tea. That is a matron's duty, not mine."

He smiled, with his eyes fixed on hers. Then, with a gently-spoken adieu he went his way.

Joscelyne moved slowly into the parlour, where the urn was hissing on the table. She was afraid of the Major's questions, and scarcely dared to glance in his direction as she took her seat. But the old

man had enjoyed a comfortable doze, and was in a fairly good humour; and Bennet came in with an evening paper in his hand. There was something to be discussed; some accident had happened somewhere. Joscelyne was allowed to meditate in peace behind the friendly shelter of the old urn.

Her brief talk with Alban Wooledge had given new strength to her hopes. If his lips had said little, his hands and eyes had been eloquent enough to silence all misgivings. She felt sure that the day was coming which should decide her fate. She did not question his love; but she caught a glimpse of some slight barrier which had yet to be removed.

In the midst of her dreams, she happened to look at her brother, and started at the sight of his haggard face.

The fancy struck Joscelyne that Dulcie had met Bennet, and reminded him of their dark secret. Trouble seemed to have settled on him like a dense cloud. An expression of weariness—almost of disgust—was stamped upon his face; his eyes were heavy and dull. And his very voice had changed; it had taken a hopeless tone which at times became almost humble, and fell painfully on Joscelyne's ear.

"That girl has made him feel her power over him," she thought. "She is the dark spot in our lives. If only we could leave this place, and go where she could never find us!"

Major Daughton did not in the least suspect that anything was amiss with his son. It was enough for him that the young fellow answered his questions as readily as usual. But the restraint which Bennet now put upon himself, and the mask of dull composure which he wore, affected Joscelyne more sadly than any demonstration of distress. He had a great deal to hide, and he hid it very well. But oh, for the old days when there was not this evil necessity for concealment! Even the glowing picture of the future life must always be shadowed by the thought of Bennet's secret.

The Major went to bed punctually at half-past nine, and the brother and sister were left alone together. Joscelyne rose from her seat at the table, shut her work-box, and went over to the vacant arm-chair by the fire. Bennet threw aside the paper, and looked at her for a moment in silence.

"I thought I saw Wooledge coming out of our gate," he said at last.

"He called at five. There is to be a gathering of parish-workers at the vicarage on Thursday. Leila is going away before Christmas."

"Leila is going away, is she?" Bennet repeated slowly.

"Yes; she has never cared much for the life here. It does not suit her, she says. But I suppose she will come back to her brother for a time."

Bennet drew his chair nearer to the fire, and gave his sister another long silent look.

"Joscelyne," he said in a very quiet voice, "I have always thought that Wooledge loved you. Has he told you so?"

"Not yet." She did not shrink from her brother's question as she had shrunk from her father's.

"He has not bound himself to you in any way?"

"No; but—"

She paused, and he saw her dark eyes shining in the firelight.

"Well, Joscelyne?"

"I think the time is not far distant when he will speak plainly."

She sat quite still, gazing into the fire, her white hands folded in her lap, looking an embodiment of womanly content.

"I thought—I hoped he had spoken," Bennet said after a pause.

"I was almost sure when I saw him coming out of the gate."

"But why do you wish to hurry him?" she asked, with a ring of anxiety in her voice.

"I want your happiness to be made certain, Joscelyne. I know well enough there is no chance of happiness for me."

"You are too desponding, dear," she said.

"No." He spoke with dull resignation. "Everything is over in my life. I must jog on as well as I can, and I don't care how soon I come to the end. But you are made for a happy lot, and I hope to heaven that you will have it."

"I think I am going to have it. Something came very near me to-day—nearer than it has ever come before. And when—when it is settled, of course we shall go away to live in a new place. You will come with us, Bennet, and cut yourself loose from all these dreadful associations. You must start afresh and forget the past."

"I shall go," he said in his dull voice, "but not with you. I won't cast my shadow upon you. Wooldedge will take care of 'little Josey,' as mother would have said. She was a good mother; I have gone wrong without her."

"But you will go right again." Joscelyne laid her slender hand on his. "Oh, Bennet, why are you so hopeless to-night?"

"I'm not more hopeless than I have been on other nights. You have a look of mother this evening; your eyes are like hers. And so something came very near you? You could see what was in his heart?"

"Yes." The soft light overspread her face again. "Bennet, dear, do you—"

"What?" he asked wonderingly.

"Do you like Mr. Wooldedge? Really like him, you know?"

Bennet considered. It was not an easy question to answer with perfect truth, and he contented himself with saying at last:

"I think he'll be a safe fellow for you to marry."

She looked at him doubtfully. The words had not satisfied her at all.

"Alban Wooldedge is very good," she said. "But I think his goodness is not of the kind which you men appreciate. My father quite hates him."

"Did father say that he hated him?" Bennet almost smiled.

"Not exactly. But he said disrespectful things, and I walked out of the room."

Bennet laughed outright. "What a staunch little wife you'll be, Joscelyne!"

"Of course I shall. Bennet, you haven't answered my question?"

"Your question," he said slowly. "Well, perhaps there *is* a kind of goodness which men don't appreciate. I can't see Wooledge with your eyes; but I believe he is to be trusted with my sister's happiness, and that is saying a great deal."

She smiled, well pleased, yet not contented.

"I suppose you think him cold, don't you, Bennet? It is so easy to mistake reserve for coldness."

"I think he's cautious, tremendously cautious, Joscelyne."

"Cautiousness is a good quality."

Bennet's eyes and mouth relaxed into a smile again.

"Joscelyne," he said, "you spoke as if you were determined to praise something you didn't like. No women like caution; they adore impetuosity in lovers."

"It is you men who adore impetuosity," she retorted scornfully. "Papa actually said that every true man had something of the savage in him. Fancy that! And education and religion have been doing their best for years to stamp out the last vestiges of the savage. Of course, papa is not modern; but you——"

"Father is always wrong when he gets upon ethics; and he hasn't expressed his real meaning at all," said Bennet, quietly amused. "But don't worry yourself about his remarks; when the time comes, Wooledge will find him a most gentlemanly father-in-law."

"Mr. Wooledge has been very nice to papa. I don't know why he should receive hatred for his goodwill. Even you are a little unfair, Bennet."

"Unfair! My dear girl, I've been sitting here, steadily saying agreeable things about your friend for half-an-hour at least."

"Well, perhaps I expect too much of you," she admitted gently. "Do you know you are looking quite worn out? Go off to bed at once."

The weariness of despair had settled on his face again. He rose, kissed her, and went slowly upstairs to his room.

A few minutes later Joscelyne, too, went upstairs, but her heart and step were lighter than his. It was a dark night sown thickly with stars. She stopped for a moment at a narrow window on the landing, and looked up, overwhelmed by that mystery of the solemn sky. "Oh," she thought suddenly. "Are there any homes *there*?"

(*To be continued.*)

RÉNÉ.

THE Paris winter of 1840 was an unusually long and severe one, and even in the Quartier Latin (where the old overhanging houses were packed too tightly, one would have thought, to have done more than admit the necessary ventilation) the rough east wind was carving the fallen snow into fantastic shapes.

It was the sixth of December, and although it was still early in the morning, the Court of the Greensward was already astir with the cheerful hum of voices and the tramp of many feet.

It used to be an old tradition with Bohemian Paris that from the Eve of St. Nicholas to New Year's Day the weeks were to be spent in riot and holiday-making, and there were few artists so poor or students so laborious but they were now busily engaged in packing away books and canvas, or counting over their often very limited capital.

Some of the men had actually received invitations from the outer world, which was a rare enough event in a court famed for the poverty of its occupants. Others again had had a stroke of luck, and with lighter hearts and heavier pockets were debating the advisability of expending the hardly-earned louis before the rumour of their wealth should reach their creditors' ears. Altogether, with the general sense of holiday feeling that was pervading it, the scene might have served for the nucleus of a Christmas paper.

This notion in fact did occur to one young fellow who was leaning lazily in one of the open doorways, and for a brief moment he wondered if he should go back to his room and turn it into "copy." But almost with this idea came the remembrance of a rapidly increasing pile of unsaleable MSS., and philosophically concluding that it was useless to add to their number, he plunged his hands yet farther into his empty pockets and stayed where he was.

And yet as he lounged there in the doorway, he hardly looked like one to be easily beaten in the struggle of life. The thin, earnest face with its square-cut jaw and determined mouth, was the face of a man of energy, and the blue Breton eyes that looked out so fearlessly from under the mass of dark tangled hair, were eyes that had faced both work and misery and never flinched from either.

" Hôlà, Réné ! "

" Star-gazing in broad day-light ! "

" Tell me, then, *mon brave*, what is the latest news from the celestial spheres ? "

" Star-gazing ? Nonsense ! Réné is dreaming of his lady-love, a dark-eyed soubrette, gentlemen, and she answers to the name of—What is it, Réné ? Rose ? Glycère ? "

A passing knot of students had surrounded him, laughing and joking, and Réné faced them good-humouredly.

"As you please, Jean-Marie. You know her better than I do."

There was a general laugh.

"Réné is right," cried a bright-looking lad. "He is a perfect anchorite, and cares more for his work than for all the dark eyes in the world! Come along, you others, you are wasting your time, and I am hungry. We are going to breakfast at the *Café Valpère*, Réné."

"That is right, Titon. Good appetite to you," responded the other, and the merry party went on. The boy, Titon, lingered a moment.

"Jean-Marie is standing us the breakfast. His uncle sent him the money," he explained; and then added vindictively: "And he is a brute not to ask you; but he won't forgive you not praising his picture."

"I know, I know," was the hasty reply. "But I couldn't go, Titon: Pierre is worse."

"Worse? Pierre!" There was a minute's pause while the boy looked curiously into Réné's white face. He cared nothing for Pierre Leroux, who was not popular in the court, but as Réné's room-mate he had a certain claim upon him which Titon could not ignore. "Do you think he is hungry, Réné?"

Réné Massieu shifted his position for the first time, and the stern young lips twitched involuntarily. This fretful, sickly, clever Pierre, for whom even his own popularity could not obtain more than a faint toleration from the rest, was infinitely dear to him, and Titon's words cut him to the quick.

"Yes, that's it. Now be off with you," he said roughly, and with a warm hand-clasp, Titon obeyed.

Left to himself, Réné Massieu went wearily up the old crazy staircase until he came near his own door, when the sound of a shrill woman's voice made him hasten his steps. "Mère Picôt is at him again about the rent; he ought to have locked the door as I wished," he thought regretfully as he entered the room.

On a rough settle in the corner lay a boy of about nineteen, whose drawn face was well-nigh purple with his attempts to control the fit of coughing that prevented his speaking. In the middle of the room stood the irate Mère Picôt, the landlady, with vehement remonstrance written in every line of her person, from the flat white cap to the huge wooden *sabots* which she stamped in noisy rage upon the floor. At Réné's entrance they both turned towards him, pouring out their grievances in chorus.

"Réné!" gasped the boy, his words broken by the racking cough, "is it to be endured that I am not to be left alone in my own room? There have I been as blank as my paper all the morning, and now I get an idea it is snatched from me and I am forced to listen to a torrent of abuse!"

"Abuse, is it?" screamed back Mère Picôt. "There are four weeks owing for your half of the rent. Monsieur Réné pays his half,

and feeds you both. Why can't you work for yourself, you good-for-nothing? Why can't you——"

Réné's unheeded remonstrances and her own torrent of words were alike stayed in dismay. The cough had suddenly ceased, and Pierre lay back on the settle, white and stiff, with a thick crimson stream slowly oozing from between his lips.

"Great heavens! He has broken a blood-vessel," cried Réné, while the landlady, hardly less startled, ran to his assistance.

"Pierre! Look up, Pierre!"

"That is no use," broke in the more experienced Mère Picôt, "don't lift his head. Leave him to me. Go you and get some snow, or ice if you can find it in the streets, and ask Monsieur Martin to come up here."

Réné ran off to do her bidding, and speedily returned, bearing the ice, and followed by an old gentleman.

"*Eh bien*, let me see him then," began the new-comer abruptly. "*Gently, mon garçon*. Ah!" after a rapid examination. "A mere trifle. Not much mischief done."

With skilful hands he lifted and arranged his patient, and then sat down on the floor by his side.

"Go away, madame," he said authoritatively; "and you, monsieur, sit down and be quiet. He is to go to sleep now, but I shall stay here till he wakes."

The others nodded acquiescence, and Réné seated himself quietly. He was used to the old man's eccentricities, and was only too thankful to have Pierre in such good hands. Monsieur Martin had at one time been a shining light in the medical world, but for some reason had been expelled the hospitals. His enemies said that an intermittent craving for drink had affected his brain, and so rendered him unreliable; he himself ascribed his downfall to professional jealousy. However that may have been, he was a perfect God-send to the Quartier Latin, where he visited patients free of charge, and only asked in return that neither they nor he should speak unnecessary words.

When Pierre awoke, quieted and refreshed, he was subjected to a searching examination, and then at last the doctor spoke. He told the two friends that Pierre was in no immediate danger. Insufficient food and clothing and exposure to the inclement weather had slightly affected his lungs; but if he could be kept warm and well fed until the spring, the incipient delicacy would pass, and he would probably grow into a strong man.

Réné went to bed thoroughly dispirited. The only work that Pierre had done for the last three months was a little play that was at present under consideration at the Palais Royal; their united capital was almost wholly expended; he himself could procure no regular work. The one bright spot on their horizon was that the editor of *L'Appel au Peuple* owed him three hundred francs for a series of

articles he had contributed to the pages of that journal, and, moreover, this payment was due upon the following day.

That Pierre must be kept indoors and sufficiently fed was a necessity that Réné never dreamt of debating. Pierre was his junior by three years, and he cherished and clung to him with far more ardour and fidelity than the majority of his comrades to their much-vaunted sweethearts. When Réné Massieu, recently orphaned, and with no near ties to bind him to his birth-place, had resolved to quit the little town in Brittany and go up to the French capital, young Pierre Leroux, the banker's son, had been fired with a wish to accompany him. Old Monsieur Leroux had stormed, and Réné had striven to dissuade him, but the boy would have his way. He had it, and the result was that old Leroux disowned his son, and the two lads faced the Paris world penniless and alone. That was three years ago, and how far it had been possible for the reckless talented Pierre and for the less clever but far more industrious Réné to succeed without any interest to back them, the elder lad's anxious wonderments have already sufficiently shown.

When Réné awoke in the morning there was a certain briskness about his movements and a cheery ring in his voice that showed that a new determination had been taken. He would go to Pierre's uncle, a certain Monsieur André Leroux, who was a banker in Paris, and intercede with him on his nephew's behalf.

It was hard for both the lads to own that their ambitious dreams had faded, and that with starvation staring them in the face, this charity-seeking had become a pressing necessity; but hunger is an irresistible argument, and at last Réné started on his self-imposed task.

He found the banker's private house—a fine mansion near the Champs Elysées—and by dint of infinite coaxing, persuaded the portress to admit him into her master's august presence.

As polished and as hard as the marble mantelpiece against which he was leaning, Monsieur Leroux listened courteously to Réné's explanation and then gently shook his head.

"Sad,—very sad," he said softly. "I have not seen my nephew for years, but I shudder to think of him fallen to such depths."

"But you must help him, monsieur. Do you not understand? Pierre is ill. He may die without proper care."

The banker smiled indulgently at the impetuous interruption. "Pierre won't die," he said equably. "The Leroux cling to life in a manner that is positively amazing. But sit down, my dear Monsieur Massieu, and let me try to understand. What is it you want me to do?"

"Help Pierre."

The elder man sighed. "Dear Monsieur Massieu," he began again, speaking in his smoothest and most polished voice, "are you not a little, just a little, unreasonable? I spend a tolerably long life in working laboriously to acquire wealth. I idolize luxury, and dread

discomfort. To obtain the one and to rid myself of the other I have worked hard, as I told you, and I have succeeded in my desire. Recognising that a man's troubles usually reach him through his family, I have remained single. And now you ask me to assist, even to ask into my house, if I have understood you aright, a young *vaurien*, a ne'er-do-well, who has been disowned by his father, and who, on your own showing, has not sufficient brains to keep himself."

Réné gulped down his indignation, and strove to answer calmly.

"Pierre is very clever," he assured him.

"And yet cannot sell his work? *Pardon*, monsieur! Talent wins its reward in a place like Paris, and, were Pierre clever, he would meet with success." And the man who had met with success twirled his diamond ring and smiled imperturbably at his visitor.

"If he were successful, you would help him, then?" asked Réné despairingly, as he thought of the cruel task of breaking his ill news at home.

"Assuredly!" Réné glanced up in mute surprise. "If I could receive good proof that he had brains and the makings of a writer, I would push him as I would push any other young fellow I thought would be a credit to me. His father was, and is, furious because he thinks of a writer as a mere publisher's hack, who is at everyone's beck and call; but those are only his old-fashioned country notions. I, now, am a man of the day, and I march with the times. Pierre might have a grand career before him—more especially as a playwright, for the drama will be a greater influence than the novel—but then he must have brains."

"He has a play under consideration now at the Palais Royal!" cried Réné, brightening up. "We are to have the answer to-day."

"*Vive l'espérance!*" cried the old man gaily. "Why, you seem to expect an acceptance?"

"Yes, we do," said Réné stoutly. "Monsieur Leroux, if he should succeed——"

Even the hard-headed banker was a little shaken by the look of piteous entreaty in the lad's face; and though his answer was hasty, it was emphatic.

"The night Pierre gets a play produced, not merely accepted, mind, I will help him. He shall live here, and I will push him on. But I will not help a fool; and if he applies to me again before this mythical play is produced, the bargain falls through."

"*Merci*, monsieur! But will you not write the conditions for Pierre to see?"

"To give him a hold on me, you mean?" retorted the man of business. "I am willing; it will save me from being worried in the future."

The paper once signed and delivered, Réné took his leave and turned his steps to the Palais Royal.

The play was accepted.

In the first rush of delight Réné hardly listened to the hurried arrangements of the stage-manager, who was busy superintending some rehearsal, but when he was once more in the street, he grasped their meaning. Pierre's play, a modern comedy which required no special scenery, was to be put into immediate rehearsal, and produced on the eve of the new year. In accordance with a custom that was then in vogue, the new dramatist would receive part payment for his work on the night of production; but it would clearly have been useless to have asked for it in advance. The present director was a surly-minded man, and not likely to part with his money before the required time.

But it did not matter very much, thought Réné, as he turned his weary steps towards the office of *L'Appel au Peuple*, for his own earnings, with the utmost care, could be made to serve until the end of the month, and then—hey!—for the production of the new play that meant an assured future for Pierre Leroux, and a lifting from his own young shoulders of the double burden that had weighed them down so long.

The snow had begun falling, but Réné strode along unheeding. The blue Breton eyes that were the only good feature in a face that was too haggard and lined for beauty were sparkling brightly, and as he walked he whistled the catching air of the latest student song. Only three more weeks, and then Pierre's future would be secured, and he—Réné—free to renew the battle—only three more weeks! *Vive l'espérance!*

"The chief of the police begs to inform those whom it may concern that the editor of L'Appel au Peuple has been arrested for promulgating revolutionary sentiments. The publication of the journal has been forbidden. Any writers, agents, or others, having pecuniary claims against the editor, are requested to send the usual notification to the chief of the police. All claims allowed will be settled the 1st of January, 1841."

This was the notice that was attached to the closed shutters of the publishing office, and amongst the little knot of men who were gathered on the pavement reading it stood Réné Massieu. The office shut! Payment deferred until New Year's Day! He stared at the notice with dazed, unseeing eyes, conscious only of a blank feeling of loss, until one of the group of men shook him by the shoulder, and so woke him rudely from his stupor.

"*Dites donc, mon ami*, will fainting mend it?" queried a rough voice. "I was porter, I was, but it seems we may both whistle for our money at present."

Réné drew his hand quickly over his eyes, and looked vacantly at his interlocutor.

"See now, monsieur," went on the sturdy little porter, "times are hard, and perhaps monsieur has not dined yet. My little wife makes

an excellent soup, and our room is close at hand. Monsieur has often been good to me. Will he not dine with me to-day?"

It was a kind offer and kindly meant, but Réné started as if he had been stung. The proud blood rushed to his cheeks, and before he could even answer, the little porter was humbly apologising. Réné cut him short.

"It is very good of you," he said hastily, "and I have no doubt that madame makes excellent soup. But I must go home, and I am not—I am not hungry, thank you."

It was a difficult home-coming for the young fellow. Pierre was so full of his first important success and of the promise contingent upon it, that he could not realise that which was a waking nightmare to Réné: namely, how they two were to subsist for the intervening three weeks.

"You see, Réné," said the lad pompously, "when once the play is started and I am helped by my uncle, I shall be able to make both our fortunes. We will have our poems bound in one volume, Réné; blue covers, I think, with gilt edges; and I will send a copy home to Brittany, and my father will see it and be proud of me."

Réné let him ramble on, but in sight of the bare cupboard and empty purse he could not join him in his castle-building. When the younger lad was asleep that night, Réné was still awake, pacing the room in anxious thought, and weighing every possibility of procuring ready money. Literary work he knew was out of the question. Several papers had been suppressed lately, on the plea that they were "promulgating revolutionary sentiments," and to-day's seizure of *L'Appel* would not tend to improve matters. Even in his immediate neighbourhood there were scores of journalists who could not obtain work, and who consequently with the best will in the world could be of no assistance to him. Of borrowing money, indeed, there seemed to be no chance. The richer amongst his friends had already gone on their holidays, and those who remained were almost in as terrible straits as himself.

The night wore on, and when at last Réné Massieu flung himself down upon the boards that served him as a bed, he was so utterly wearied out that his jaded brain could contain but one thought. And this thought was that at all costs Pierre must be kept well and strong to fit him for the brilliant career that was opening before him.

These pages are not meant as a record of the life of Réné Massieu. He was only one of the many, and the story of his terrible three weeks' struggle is but an episode in the great surging life of the Quartier Latin, where many a scapegrace found a refuge, it is true, but where many a generous deed took birth. The eccentric old doctor, who would gladly have helped the boys, had been seized with one of his restless fits and had gone off on the tramp; Mère Picot, who might have forgiven her favourite Réné the owing rent, had

slipped upon some snow and was in the hospital with a broken leg, while the sister who had temporarily taken her place was a grasping woman, who insisted on immediate payment. And thus on every hand fate seemed to be against him. It was easy enough for Pierre Leroux, sitting over the tiny fire and dreaming of the great things he would do for himself and for Réné in the years to come, to bring up a dozen expedients by which his friend might be earning money for the few days that yet remained ; but those same easily-planned suggestions were sorely hard to put into practice.

"I can't get labourer's work. They say I have a student's stoop and am not fit for it," Réné would say briefly when Pierre urged him to curry favour with the good-natured porter ; but of the hardships of the long day's tramping in the wintry streets Pierre knew nothing. He was accustomed to depend so utterly upon him that he never questioned how the food was procured, and only marvelled at Réné's whim for taking his own meals with young Titon. Titon might have told another tale, but he and Pierre never met, and Réné managed matters in his own way.

The days went on. Christmas Day had passed, and the theatre-walls were placarded with notices of the new play. With a remnant of his old boyish fun, Réné had slipped one of the flaring bills under Monsieur Leroux's door, and when at last the fateful day arrived, and he was helping to dress Pierre for his expedition to the theatre, he was able to tell him that his uncle had taken the stage box.

The young author looked brisk and well. The cough had almost left him, and his intense excitement was sufficient to flush his cheeks and brighten his eyes. Monsieur Leroux would be proud of his nephew, predicted Réné ; and then fearful of the piercing east wind he went out to hail a *fiacre* to take his friend to the theatre.

"You are coming with me, Réné ?"

"No, I am not, boy. It is only six o'clock, and no one is wanted so early except the 'successful dramatist.' Come, then ! Get in, *mon ami*," and he shook the carriage door impatiently. "I will be with you before eight, in time for the rising of the curtain."

Grumbling his dissatisfaction, Pierre Leroux seated himself in the *fiacre*, and then heedless of Réné's remonstrances, he lowered the window for a final word. For the first time for many days he forgot both himself and the wonderful play that was to lay the foundation of his fortune, and he was struck by the pinched wan look upon his friend's face.

"Réné, are you ill ?" he asked anxiously.

"No. Just a little tired. Drive on, *cocher*. All success to you, Pierre. You will see me in plenty of time to help you carry home your laurel crowns."

The gay words died away as the *fiacre* drove off briskly ; but the smile was still hovering upon his lips as he turned back into the house and went slowly upstairs to the deserted room. He well might

smile, Réné told himself, forming the thought laboriously as the outcome of a painfully overwrought mind, for his efforts, like Pierre's, had been crowned with success. He had achieved his purpose, and all the rest mattered but little.

How steep and high the well-known stairs had grown. He stumbled up them feeling as if the difficult ascent could never be the one he had often scaled so lightly, and when he reached his own room he flung himself down like a log. It was too early for the theatre yet; he would sleep off this strange faintness that was creeping over him, and awake refreshed. Pierre must be nearing the theatre by now. Who would meet him? Mère Picôt? Nonsense! He meant monsieur. . . . Whom did he mean? Monsieur. . . .

The last faint gleam of daylight faded sullenly away, and the sombre darkness spread slowly like a pall over the unconscious figure of the sleeping boy.

* * * * *

When he awoke his limbs felt cramped and leaden, and his head and hands were burning. It was with some difficulty he remembered where he was, but when at last he did so, he scrambled to his feet with feverish energy and opened his room door. He listened. It was very strange. In the house that was usually so noisy, all was still; and as Réné crept swiftly downstairs, clinging frantically to the handrail that seemed to elude his grasp, there was not a glimmer of light to be seen from under the numerous doors. He found the hall-door bolted and locked, and laughing softly at the precautions which had closed the house so early in the evening, he undid the fastenings and let himself into the street.

It was a fearful night. The snow was falling heavily on the already thickly covered earth, and over it the east wind was running riot, beating the snow-flakes into compact masses and hurling them against any luckless pedestrian. The slight frame of Réné Massieu staggered at the first buffet of the wind, but the cold revived his failing senses and he pushed on cheerily. It was not far to the Palais Royal, and he knew every inch of the way. The play must have begun, but Pierre would forgive him, and he would be in time to carry home the promised laurel crowns. Suddenly it struck him how deserted the streets were. There were no lights visible in the windows, and there were neither people nor carriages to be seen. Even this great block of buildings round which he was plodding his way bore no sign of life within its walls. What buildings were they, by-the-bye?

A sudden trembling seized him as he realised that it was the theatre itself round which he had been wandering so aimlessly. Yet it was all dark and shut up. Suddenly, the meaning of the darkened and deserted city burst upon him. He must have slept far longer than he had intended, and it must be late; perhaps the middle of the night! Pierre must have gone to a supper given in honour of the new playwright and then returned home after Réné had started; or more likely

still, he had grown angry at Réne's supposed defection, and had gone straight back to his uncle's house.

One ! two ! three ! boomed the clock of a neighbouring church-tower, and Réne, who had been leaning helplessly against the theatre wall, started violently.

"Three o'clock in the morning. New Year's Day !" he cried joyously. "New Year's Day !"

There was a little pause while the snow fell heavily upon his unprotected head, and then he began running, swaying weakly from side to side. The New Year's Day he had waited for so long ! The glad New Year when Pierre was to begin the life of luxury and assistance ; and when he, Réne, would receive the deferred payment which was to enable him to face the world with new courage and a new strength.

As he ran, the floating snowflakes took the form of white rosebuds, and the thoughts of beauty and of love which the young poet had been forced to reject in favour of the more bread-winning journalism, came back to him now and filled him with a strange content. One opening bud held the sweet face of a young girl whom he had known and loved in Brittany, in those far-away days before sadder times had put an end to his dream. This scented rose held his father's calm grave face ; and this, the contented look of Pierre Leroux as he had last seen him. A cluster of buds held the friends of his boyhood, but in the pure spotless petals of a yet sweeter rose lay a face last looked upon when he was but a little child. What eyes were those, he questioned, with the mother-love shining in their peaceful depths ? The rose was within his grasp. He would pluck it.

There was a sudden staying of the rapid wavering foot-steps, and two eager hands were clutching at the empty air. And then there was a muffled cry, a sudden backward fall—and Réne Massieu lay motionless, with those same snow-flakes that his wandering fancy had shaped into the pure loves of his young life, falling tenderly upon his breast.

And the night wore on. No one passed that way. There were no doctors there to talk learnedly of the weakened state to which exposure and want had brought both body and mind, and so had prevented even the desire to rise and shake off the torpor that meant death. There was not even a kindly watcher to tell at what hour the winging spirit took its flight. But when with the first streak of the coming dawn the bells of Paris broke out into glorious chiming in greeting to the glad New Year, the pale quivering sun-gleams fell full upon the dead boy, and lighted the pallid lips. The sunshine was Réne's Welcome to the Mansions of the Blessed, and the joy-bells were his Requiem.

M. E. WOTTON.

THE ADJUTANT'S SWIM.

BY MAY CROMMELIN.



NOW part of this story may be read with doubt, if not disbelief. Some of my friends, indeed, go so far as to hint that some three years' residence in Ireland, as adjutant of the Black Northerners, has made me no less Irish than any Ulsterman. And the men of the north, though less given to speaking unadvisedly with their lips than their lighter-hearted and impulsive brethren of the other three provinces, yet love likewise to make a good story just a trifle better, especially if thereby they can slyly poke fun at a too credulous listener.

But this my tale is gospel truth.

It was the hottest summer in Ireland most people remembered. Naturally old soldiers like myself, who could tell a tale of Indian experience, thought little of it. But our Northerns, especially the recruits, were as limp as if the marrow had melted in their bones.

We were come out for our annual training. As Dryden unkindly says, it was the time when—

“Raw in fields the rude militia swarms,
Youths without hands, maintained at vast expense,
In peace a charge, in war a weak defence.”

Well, of all the hot days that summer the one I am going to speak of was the hottest. We were out on afternoon parade, but were doing “no good at all.” Even the sergeants considered the sultriness “over anything,” so one of them confided to me, with perspiring brow. As to the men, they were sick with it; they had no heart for their work, and my pity was stirred for them.

Not so that of our chief. Stout, sixty, and his usually jovial face turning sourer and sourer, he was rapidly becoming a study in blue and purple.

On ordinary days he much resembled—

“Plump Comus in a colonel's coat.”

But on this scorcher, what between a uniform of bygone slimmer years, and a restive charger, our Silenus seemed likely to have a fit.

At last, watching his wine-coloured visage darkening to Tyrian hue, I grew alarmed. Meanwhile the men were melting like candles in a heated ball-room.

"They're disimproving, but then what wind there is is a Morocco," sighed Sergeant Moloney.

Presently a brilliant idea lightened my gloom.

Taking my opportunity, being on the colonel's right hand, I contrived to utter words of persuasion.

"The men are no better than shapeless jellies, sir, but it is a terribly hot day. Don't you think it would be well to let them off any more drill, and make them bathe instead? A swim in the lake would do them all the good in the world."

"What—bathe? now? No more drill? Bless my soul! Why in the name of common sense, etc., etc.," spluttered the worthy chief.

He invariably began by making objections to all his adjutant's propositions by way of asserting his authority, but as invariably ended by accepting them. This was the case now, after some more judicious pressure. With a sudden air of spontaneous generosity, he gave the required permission, and dismissed the parade.

Now the lake where the men were to bathe lay only some few hundred yards from the large field that was our drill-ground. In fact, it was the sight of its cool surface and the shade of a few trees, though these were stunted and scattered, that put the wish into my head. There never were men so happy as my poor Northerns when they heard the good news. In next to no time they were all by the lake edge, playing tricks on each other like boys let loose from school.

Well, I had considered how to manage the business, and nothing was ever better planned, in my modest opinion.

There was to be no such thing allowed as a general rush helter-skelter into the water. Each company must take its turn, and the sergeants had orders to be particularly careful that no man should enter the water at all unless he knew how to swim. For the lake happened to be very deep, and the banks went straight down as a wall into the water. A fixed time was likewise given for each set to disport themselves.

Back went the Black Northerners to their tents to leave their heavy accoutrements. Presently a much cheerier crowd in considerably lighter attire reappeared, carrying towels instead of arms.

Tying up my horse to a tree near the lake, I myself retired to a knoll some way back. Here, sitting down, the adjutant took his ease, overlooking operations, while the man smiled a warm smile upon his fellow men enjoying existence. Perhaps he wished rank did not forbid him to strip also, and take a header like these others.

Presently my retreat was found out. The doctor attached to the regiment, a capital fellow, who loved a good listener, and had no end of stories, joined me to enjoy a pipe.

"Poor land this," he presently remarked. "It reminds me of a story about a friend of mine who was travelling in Connemara. He kept looking around with the eye of a Meath farmer, and at last said to his jarvey, 'Well, now, Pat, that's poor land, though you keep on praising it. Now, how many would that feed to the acre?' 'Troth,' says Pat, scratching his head, 'I think your honour—I think one hare in the summer-time, but before winter came she'd take to her heels.'"

"Look there! What's that?" I interrupted, springing to my feet and staring towards the lake.

Some distance out there were two men swimming near each other, who were going through rather odd antics. They were splashing, churning up the water, and making mill-wheels of their arms, as if for sport. But was it?

"There may be something wrong, colonel. I'll go and see."

With that downhill I ran as fast as a tight uniform and spurs would allow me. All the while the same game was going on in the water, only more feebly. The men were growing exhausted with their struggles.

"Sergeant, those men are drowning."

"Troth, Captain, I'm feared they are."

There was no time for hesitation. I just tore open my tunic, threw off my sword and went into the water as I was, spurs and all.

Well, out I struck doing my very best, and by the time I got to where the men were, though one of them was still keeping himself afloat the other was plainly done. He was still on the surface, nevertheless, and why it was he did not sink is a puzzle, even now when one considers it.

There he was, however, nearly unconscious, so taking a good clutch of his sandy hair I took him in tow. This first part of the task was comparatively easy, and pretty soon I got my man safe to the shore. Here my friend the doctor, who had hurried after me, promptly swooped on his lawful charge whom he soon made a good private again instead of a corpse.

All the regiment was now gathering on the bank and gave me a rousing cheer that warmed my heart to the work. Somehow none of the men seemed sure of themselves in the water. In fact there was not a good swimmer among them. So they did not offer to help, probably thinking I was quite able to carry out the rescue single-handed.

Well, round I turned and swam back for my second man, amid a roar of enthusiasm.

Now, it is odd, but perfectly true, that I did not feel one jot tired as yet. Certainly I had always taken a modest pride in my exploits of swimming, which were reckoned above the average. Still, it would have been natural to have felt out of breath, being weighed down with my heavy uniform and boots, and in a general way I probably should have done so, but perhaps excitement buoyed me up.

So, stroke after stroke I got nearer and nearer to where the other fellow had been, but where he was not now.

No, there was not a trace of the poor Black Northerner; yet, without a doubt, he had been about here when last I saw his arms working wildly. And there—yes—were some bubbles on the water, three or four yards to my right. Getting up to the spot my thought was to dive when I got a glimpse of the missing man. The lake was so clear one could see a long way down in the water, and there was a black human poll beneath me, sinking and sinking.

Quick as lightning down I shot and made a grasp at his hair. But it was short and slipped through my fingers. I was just about to try a second time when I felt myself caught and dragged down!

Merciful powers! The drowning wretch had just enough consciousness left to raise his arm when he felt my touch. And he had clutched firm hold of my spur.

Down we went together, down—down. It seemed to me as if we were sinking to the very roots of the hills. Then we began to come up again.

Oh! the blessed relief of rising to the surface once more, even with that terrible weight on my heel. I was choking as if all the water in the lake had gone down my throat.

What saved me from sinking again was a desperate feeling that life was sweet—that I *would* make an effort to strike out for it.

The next few minutes were simply awful. There was a mist before my eyes and a singing in my ears, while my chest was so oppressed every laboured breath was pain. None remained in me to cry out with, and all I could hope for blindly, vaguely, was that someone on the shore would see my distress and come to my help. As they told me afterwards, not a man of all the regiment stirred.

They simply stood watching me, thinking that I had not been able to save the second soldier, so was returning disappointed.

My clothes were like a ton weight, and that incubus fastened to my feet seemed a millstone that must soon drown me in the depths of the lake. Then a devilish longing possessed my mind to kick off the drowning wretch and save myself. But I am thankful now that I had not strength enough.

On, on, slower and slower *we* went. Now I could see the bank clearly and all the waiting half-dressed men watching. Little they guessed, seeing me apparently alone, that their comrade's body was dragging behind me under the water.

A few more yards and I struggled nearer, afraid to lose my strength by calling out. Then the voice of big Sergeant Maloney came as in a dream to my ears.

“Begorra! I always thought till now the Captain was a good swimmer!”

Such rage possessed me at the stupidity of the by-standers, that if only it could have been granted me to give Maloney a crack on the

jaw I would have died happy next moment. Idiot! ass! not to know that seldom had any man done such a swimming feat before.

Three or four more desperate strokes brought me nearer the bank that rose straight some feet above deep water. Then my last flicker of strength ebbed and I could only just gasp:

"Help! The other man's holding on to my foot." They heard me.

"Where's the fishing-rod? Throw him the line. Look sharp boys," cried various voices.

Feebly I tried to grasp the line that was thrown me, and it broke. Down under water once more—the recoil had been too much. Down—down! But a second time I came up, though exhausted. The end of a fishing-rod touched my grasping fingers. And as the poor devil below had clutched my heel, so I clutched the rod—and knew no more.

* * * * *

When next consciousness returned, I was lying in my tent, and the low beams of the sun were withdrawing from the door. Friendly voices cheered my ears with words of congratulation, praise, and good news. Incredible though it seemed the second private I had so strangely brought to land was alive, like his comrade, to thank me.

Together the Black Northerners had drawn us both out of the water, they told me. Together. For the seemingly dead man's hand was so tightly clutched on my spur, and the rowels so deeply embedded that his grasp could not be loosed, and it was necessary to cut out the heel of my boot. Then all praise to our doctor who, after a long and terribly difficult task, succeeded in reviving the poor fellow's apparently extinct life.

Sergeant Maloney, as kind a soul as ever breathed, came to see me next morning. His mind, he intimated, was so full of praise, hardly a word could come out any more than one wisp of hay from the middle of a stack.

"But we're proud of you, Captain, we're proud!" he exclaimed.

"Ah, Sergeant," said I. "So you thought I could not swim."

That is the end of my story. At least, nearly so. For perhaps the real ending came one fine day later, when on full-dress parade the medal of the Royal Humane Society was pinned on my breast by our Colonel's wife. As to the cheering afterwards, it rings in my ears now.



IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

AH, well-a-day ! the years are sped,
 Nor youth, nor hope, nor love remain,
 And opportunity has fled
 That never will occur again.
 The saddest of all thoughts, I ween—
 It might have been, it might have been !

When youthful passion fired the blood
 With high ambition's bright desire,
 I seized not fortune at the flood,
 And tended not the sacred fire ;
 Nor made an effort to retain
 What now I'd give the world to gain.

And oh ! the blindness and the pride
 That could not thy true heart approve,
 But lightly thrust its peace aside,
 And made a wilderness of love.
 'Tis love that lends the spirit wings
 By which to soar to higher things.

Oh, present joys, how passing sweet,
 Oh, pleasure's cup, so rich and rare,
 When time speeds by on flying feet,
 How fell, how dangerous ye are !
 For we are prone to drink too deep,
 And lull our hearts and minds to sleep.

For youth is short and quickly sped,
 Ambition is a tender flower,
 And happiness, once lost, is dead,
 And love may perish in an hour.
 But long the retrospect, I ween—
 It might have been, it might have been !

H. ST. A. DENTON.

